

Screen



Television genres

Early cinema and television

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Adorno's reproach: repetition, difference and television genre

JOHN CAUGHIE

In two recent articles in *Screen*, Steve Neale has gone some way towards extending the theorization of film genre along both general and particular lines. In 'Questions of genre'¹ he has returned to such fundamental terms of genre poetics as expectation, verisimilitude and the processes of generic change as well as to questions of institutional discourses and practices specific to cinema; his essay on the American war film breaks down the homogeneous generality of a single film genre into particular typologies of form, structure and discourse which play out particular regimes of power and ideology.² In this way, he has moved consideration of film genre from the broad, structural categories of earlier film theory to historically attentive readings, informed by a knowledge of both forms and institutions. What is at stake in this, and in the work of a number of other writers whom Neale acknowledges,³ is a sensitivity to generic difference as much as to repetition, and, in particular, to generic difference which cannot simply be assigned to the magical agency of authorship.

Reading Neale's articles in the immediate context of teaching for the first time a course dangerously titled, 'Television Theory' (is there such a thing?), I am struck by the pervasiveness of *assumptions* of genre in writing and thinking about television, and by the simultaneous difficulty of identifying where the theoretical groundings of these assumptions lie. In its endless repetition week in and week out, and in its flight from the prestige of one-off production towards the reliability of the serial or the packaged series, television seems to involve a process of categorization more

1 Steve Neale, 'Questions of genre' *Screen* vol 31 no 1 (1990) pp 45-66

2 Steve Neale, 'Aspects of ideology and narrative form in the American war film', *Screen* vol 32, no 1 (1991) pp 35-57

3 In particular Alan Williams 'Is a radical genre criticism possible?' *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* vol 9 no 2 (1984) pp 121-5

intense even than that of the mass production of Hollywood cinema in its classical period. Contemporary popular music, in fact, with its fine tuning of genre mutations and blurrings and its rapid responsiveness to demographics, might be a more productive place than popular cinema from which to start thinking about the processes of television genre. And yet, despite the centrality of categorization and genre to television production and consumption, there seems to lie little more behind most theoretical writing about television fiction than the given institutional programme categories – soap opera, sitcom, drama (with or without some recognition of cross-overs and mixing). Frequently dependent on assumptions of common cause with film theory and criticism, television genre theory is uncomplicated by the longer and more complex history of aesthetics and poetics.

This article, then, is motivated by a dissatisfaction or a discomfort with most of what passes for television theory: the doubts about the existence of anything which can usefully be called television theory are real. Questions of genre, of the organization of repetition and difference, seem fundamental to television, not only as an institution and a discourse, but also as a form of subjectivity. The understanding of that subjectivity, though it is qualified by ethnography and empirical study, is still a central problem for theory. Starting from a point further back in the development of a theory of television than that from which Steve Neale begins for cinema, I want to suggest some ways of thinking about television genre, which, though they will not deal with particular programme categories, may open out some more complex ways of thinking about the aesthetics and poetics of television. The article, then, is exploratory rather than definitive, inciting theory rather than assuming it, attempting to open up some territory or to clear some ground rather than to fortify a final position.

I want to begin with a question which Neale does not explicitly address, but which seems to me to be a particular blind-spot which has determined the shape of television critical theory: the question of value.

Adorno's reproach

With or without Horkheimer, with or without the Frankfurt School, the name of Adorno has come to stand in cultural criticism for an immediately knowable, instantly impeachable thought-crime: 'cultural pessimism'. His denunciations of the 'stylized barbarity' of the Culture Industry, most notably in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* written with Max Horkheimer in 1944,⁴ have provided an effective springboard from which to launch counter-proposals for an approach – to television particularly – more user-friendly to the complexities

⁴ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso 1944, first published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1944), particularly the essay, 'The Culture Industry: enlightenment as mass deception'. The phrase 'stylized barbarity' (p. 128) is quoted from Nietzsche

of address and response in popular or 'mass' culture. With irresistible irony, Adorno and Horkheimer's brilliant critique of the remythologization of the Enlightenment has itself, in precisely their own terms ('using the devices of familiarity and straightforward dismissal to avoid the labour of conceptualization'⁵), been turned into myth. While it may not now be possible fully to recover their critique of mass culture from the totalizing force of its own negative rhetoric, it is at least possible to regret the ease with which it has been adopted as the convenient apostasy of a new rhetoric, operating as a kind of semaphore, signalling correct positions across great distances with a simplified and purely functional code. Here, briefly, I want to take their critique seriously as a way of identifying the issue of value, of resisting the more celebratory aspects of an accommodation to the logic of commodification and consumption, and of recovering some of the ground lost or forfeited by critique.⁶

Fredric Jameson, in his recent study, finds in Adorno's cultural critique,

one crucial thematic differentiation between 'genuine art' and that offered by the Culture Industry both raise the issue and the possibility of happiness in their very being, as it were, and neither provides it; but where one keeps faith with it by negation and suffering, the other assures us it is taking place.⁷

Negation – the refusal of the administrative rationality of the bourgeois Enlightenment – lies at the heart of Adorno's project, and at the heart of the whole notion of critique and critical theory. The immediate historical provocation for their critique of conformity, indifference and the apparent predisposition to barbarity is clearly, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the rise of fascism; but what is more generally at issue is the intrusion of Enlightenment rationality, capitalist common-sense and the logic of commodification into the very core of the cultural field and the aesthetic. In Adorno's aesthetics, the value of the cultural and the aesthetic lies in difference and negation and it is this which is threatened by the commodification of culture.

Developing since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, accelerating in the nineteenth century in step with the acceleration of capitalist industry, the process of intrusion increasingly separated culture out into the familiar contours of 'high' and 'low', isolating what it could not assimilate. By the middle of the twentieth century, Adorno found himself confronted with a cultural field in which the squeezed and narrowing pinnacle of aesthetic difference and negation had all but detached itself completely from the squat, commodified mass of capitalist 'affirmative' culture. For Adorno (as, at around the same time, for Clement Greenberg), the 'genuine' avant garde, represented most emblematically in his writing by his teacher, Schoenberg, was the last vestige of 'authentic art' whose

5 I am grateful to Patrice Petro, and the students on her 1988 graduate seminar on Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for arguing me out of blinkered Brechtianism towards a more sympathetic reading of Adorno

7 Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990) p 147

8 Peter Sloterdijk *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987)

difficulty and inaccessibility were the marks of its unassimilable difference and its negation of bourgeois rationality, capitalist purposiveness, and what Peter Sloterdijk would later call 'cynical reason'.⁸ The planned and formulaic rationality of the Enlightenment, according to the critique, is increasingly marked by the familiar, the conventional and by 'sameness' – a sameness which need not exclude difference, but contains it within the rational, functional and acceptable forms of its own choosing. Acceptable difference, rather than weakening the force and the confidence of normative rationality, tightens its grip and extends its appeal.

It is characteristic of the sickness that even the best-intentioned reformer who uses an impoverished and debased language to recommend renewal, by his adoption of the insidious mode of categorization and the bad philosophy it conceals, strengthens the very power of the established order he is trying to break. False clarity is only another name for myth; and myth has always been obscure and enlightening at one and the same time – always using the devices of familiarity and straightforward dismissal to avoid the labour of conceptualization.⁹

9 Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment* p. xiv

Adorno's critique, therefore, and in particular the critique of the Culture Industry, is mounted from the increasingly beleaguered and restricted field of the avant garde, and it is this, in part, which wins it the current disapproval of the more enthusiastically affirmative, apparently democratic, or outright populist approaches to popular culture.

Undoubtedly, the failure or unwillingness of Adorno and Horkheimer to find difference in the cultural field which they survey in the Culture Industry essay – American popular culture of the thirties – is damaging. The particular avant-garde perspective of their critique (as of Greenberg's) makes it difficult to avoid first impressions of a conflation in their work of 'genuine art' with 'elite art'. It is, however, worth noting some symptomatic cracks in the uniformity of their scorn for the products of the Culture Industry. The suggestive outlines of a hierarchy of disdain can be traced: the 'tragic Garbo' is preferred to Mickey Rooney, Betty Boop to Donald Duck;¹⁰ their most acerbic denunciations are reserved not for 'amusement' or 'light' art in themselves, but for the attempt by the Culture Industry to absorb 'light' into 'serious art', accommodating difference to the familiar – 'Benny Goodman appears with the Budapest string quartet'.¹¹ Entertainment seems historically rather than essentially debased, and what emerges is a recognition of the historical *possibility* of popular entertainment as an autonomous art which might turn on its head the seriousness of official, rational discourse. Adorno and Horkheimer, the apostates, may not be so far away from Bakhtin, the new prophet, as some critical celebrants of carnival might admit:

10 *Ibid.* p. 134

11 *Ibid.* p. 136

The eccentricity of the circus, peepshow, and brothel is as embarrassing to [the Culture Industry] as that of Schoenberg or Karl Kraus ¹²

12 Ibid

Like Bakhtin, Adorno and Horkheimer recognize the capacity of physical art and non-sense to negate oppressive reason, though they shut off (only more explicitly than Bakhtin) the possibility of this capacity being realized in contemporary culture:

In some revue films, and especially in the grotesque and the funnies, the possibility of . . . negation does glimmer for a few moments. But of course it cannot happen ¹³

13 Ibid p 142

It cannot happen not because the forms of negation are mindless, but precisely because they are too mindful of meaning and significance, constantly reminded of rationality and purposive thought

The culture industry is corrupt, not because it is a sinful Babylon but because it is a cathedral dedicated to elevated pleasure. . . The culture industry does retain a trace of something better in those features which bring it close to the circus, in the self-justifying and nonsensical skill of riders, acrobats and clowns, in the 'defense and justification of physical as against intellectual art' [Wedekind]. But the refuges of a mindless artistry which represents what is human as opposed to the social mechanism are being relentlessly hunted down by a schematic reason which compels everything to prove its significance and effect. The consequence is that the nonsensical at the bottom disappears as utterly as the sense in works of art at the top.

The fusion of culture and entertainment that is taking place today leads not only to a deprivation of culture, but inevitably to an intellectualization of amusement.¹⁴

14 Ibid p 143

Like Bakhtin, again, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that mass or popular entertainment finds the condition of its existence and its significance in its relationship to 'official discourse' and the culture industry. Bakhtin continually recognizes that the parodic force of popular—festive forms could not survive unqualified after the force of the sacred word which they parodied had itself been qualified by the dawning administrative rationality of the Renaissance: the dawning of exactly that rationality which provides the pre-history of Adorno and Horkheimer's critique ¹⁵ Similarly, though from a different historical perspective, Adorno and Horkheimer, confronting the massive extension and technical development of that rationality, acknowledge the possibility, and even the residue, of difference and negation in the nonsense of eccentric entertainment – a residual refusal of official meaning – but can place no faith in its capacity to survive as anything more than fun, as anything other

15 See From the prehistory of novelistic discourse, in M. M. Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination: four essays* ed. Michael Holquist trans. Emerson and Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press 1981), particularly p. 71 quoted below

than acceptable difference within the logic of capitalist culture and the totality of the culture industry.

Where Adorno and Horkheimer differ from Bakhtin, and where their 'pessimism' emerges most clearly, is in the absence of his sense of the dialogic: of 'serious' and 'light', 'authentic culture' and 'entertainment', in dialogue with each other, each working on the other, each qualifying and transforming the other, sometimes in unpredictable ways. However rhetorically brilliant, the critique which Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* offer is ultimately a totalizing discourse in which the dialectic struggles and twists against itself, serving only to tighten the knot which binds it. It is in the myth of Odysseus that they most poignantly figure out the tragic paralysis of the dialectic, and, by extension, the quandary of cultural critique: to steer past the temptations of the Sirens whose fatal song cannot be resisted, Odysseus stuffs his men's ears with wax so that they will not be distracted from their rowing, and binds himself to the mast with orders that he must not be released. He, 'the seigneur', hears the ravishing beauty of the song, but cannot act and is not free; they labour and act in a practical fashion, but do not hear.

What Odysseus hears is without consequence for him, he is able only to nod his head as a sign to be set free from his bonds; but it is too late; his men, who do not listen, know only the song's danger but nothing of its beauty, and leave him at the mast to save him and themselves.¹⁶

¹⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 34

The sense of tragic beauty which characterizes their recasting of the myth of Odysseus permeates much of the critique. Its metaphors of inevitability and its intricate dialectical traps construct a myth of Enlightenment which has emotional as much as analytic power. At the same time, it builds a prison-house of rhetoric from which there may be no practical possibility of escape: as later with the writings of Baudrillard, their critique, in its totalizing embrace, always seems to have a neutralizing answer to suggestions of difference. It is not hard to see how attempts to value popular culture or television, or to legitimize their academic study, come up against Adorno and Horkheimer as a check which it may be easier to think around than to think through. Simply to dismiss their work as 'pessimistic', however, or to use it emblematically as a naive position which we now know better than to take seriously, seems to me hopelessly to devalue the currency of critique.

Day-to-day television, in its regularity and its availability, seems regulated by repetition and modulated by acceptable difference. Somewhat perversely, however, what I want to retain from Adorno, and from his consistent reproach, is the centrality of difference as negation rather than as variation: a difference which is not 'in-different', but in which something is at stake; and a difference, more

difficulty, which is not solely dependent on what Raymond Williams somewhere calls 'the more negotiable process of consumption'. If this involves smuggling something of an avant-garde sensibility into the theorization of television, so be it.

The question of difference and singularity was always there for 'classical' film theory as an underpinning, whether acknowledged or not, for the valorization – and particularly for the legitimation as 'progressive' – of a popular culture which is produced as product and circulates as commodity. However anti-elitist and however defensive of a culturally democratic popular, within a modernist film criticism growing out of romanticism a canon emerges in which difference was (and is) identified with the author whose individual signature separates the text and the *oeuvre* from the cynical indifference of mass production. Within a modernist film criticism inflected by structuralism or poststructuralism, generic production is valued as different by its inability to resolve the social contradictions which its repetitions and conventions are there to repress. In both, 'irrationality' – in the form of authorial personality, unconscious contradiction or excess – is discovered as negation at the heart of the commercial and purposeful rationality of capitalist production and bourgeois ideology. Adorno's critique, in fact, was never as far away from the motivations of cultural criticisms as one would imagine from the myth.

Postmodernist criticism, however, slipping away from critique and negation with varying degrees of enthusiasm, seems to challenge the security of values. It seems to invert the hierarchy, apparently renouncing the modernist insistence on difference and originality, and seeking value instead in repetition in its various forms: recombination, refunctioning, pastiche. But it is worth noting that at least for the criticism of popular culture, and of television in particular, this apparently postmodern move may have less to do with a radical change in the terms of value than with a fundamental shift of attention – and of political faith – from the text to the audience. Rather than finally rejecting difference as the central term of critical value, this criticism instead relocates value onto the difference of consumers: it is in consumption rather than in the text that originality and creativity are to be found.

Clearly there is something very important going on in this move, and at one level it is indeed a necessary corrective to the textual isolationism of much modernist criticism. For television, in particular, where the text is itself both a theoretical problem (where does a television text begin and end?), and a banal critical object (in comparison with the things people do with it), it may be inevitable that attention fastens on an *ethnography of consumption* rather than on the objects of production. And there is empirical evidence in this ethnography for an understanding of the social subjectivity of viewers which is inescapable for theoretical work on television.

17 Morley cites as examples the work of John Fiske, and at the same time, the denunciation of that work by Meaghan Morris see Dave Morley 'Where the global meets the local: notes from the sitting room' *Screen* vol 32 no 1 (1991) pp 1–15

Ethnography, however, is a fairly disciplined pursuit, and it is worth stressing David Morley's recent warning that the problem of the 'ethnography' of some recent writing is its lack of discipline, and its lack of an adequate sociology.¹⁷ The warning is clearly important. Here, for my argument, I would extend it to say that, in the absence of an adequate sociology, such 'ethnography' comes dangerously close to confusing itself with aesthetics, confusing description with evaluation. Simply (or not so simply) to relocate value onto consumption not only misrecognizes ethnography, it also leaves behind it a problem in the aesthetics of production – a problem which has both critical and political dimensions. It gives criticism, and critical theory, no way of knowing what it is for: no way, that is, of arguing for one kind of production against another, or of valuing some forms over others. Critique is replaced by commentary, and by an act of faith in the capacity of consumers to do surprising and amazing things with what they daily receive.

Questions of genre, central to any theory of television, are inextricably bound up with questions of repetition and difference, and television raises these questions in quite specific ways. Adorno seems to me to situate the problem, without necessarily being the solution to it. While attentive to the spirit of his reproach, it is not enough to retreat into the security of a duality – even a dialectic duality – in which difference is always already valorized against the corrosiveness of repetition; but nor is it enough simply to reverse the poles and allow the current to run the other way. Fredric Jameson, in his article 'Postmodernism and the video-text', comments that experimental video may provide a useful vantage point from which to think about commercial television

In that sense, thinking anything adequate about commercial television may well involve ignoring it and thinking about something else: in [this] instance, experimental video. . . . This is less a matter of mass versus elite culture than it is of controlled laboratory situations: what is so highly specialised as to seem aberrant and uncharacteristic in the [world] of daily life . . . can often yield crucial information about the properties of an object of study whose familiar everyday forms obscure it.¹⁸

While agreeing with the spirit of Jameson's suggestion that an avant-garde sensibility may displace and make strange the regularity of everyday television, it is not enough to appeal to an already formed avant garde – formed in another place or at another time and for another purpose – which can be hauled in and held up to television as a template of value. The notion of an avant-garde sensibility here functions simply as the 'other' of existing television (just as much of the most interesting experimental video refunctions existing television as *its* other), a point outside the discourse of actually existing television from which we can argue about what it is that we

18 Fredric Jameson 'Postmodernism and the video-text' in Fabb et al (eds), *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1987), p. 202 (The words in parentheses are corrections of what I take to be misprints in the published text.)

actually want. Adorno seems to offer such a 'sticking point', and for that reason it seems worth confronting his critique rather than burying it as myth. It is, in any case, one of the problems of television theory that, like television itself, it tries to operate without a history: it has no Bazin or Eisenstein to test its grounds. Adorno offers one starting point for such a history. But while his writing on mass culture might be used to place on the historical agenda of television theory the *idea* of difference and of the avant garde, the particular forms which that idea might take for television at the end of the twentieth century cannot be predicted from his work. I want now to turn to some questions of form and genre, trying to identify a particular set of formal and institutional parameters for television, and returning at the end of the essay to questions of value.

Television genre and novelistic discourse

Discussions of film and television genre habitually nod towards the broad stylistic categories fundamental to literary aesthetics since Aristotle – epic, lyric, drama, comedy, tragedy – and quickly move on to the more immediately recognizable categories under which industry products are branded and sold – horror, western, musical, soap opera, crime series. There are of course exceptions – film noir, melodrama and, for television, prime-time melodrama are critical attempts to define a genre or distinguish a subgenre where no industry label exists – and in television there is increasing recognition by both critics and producers of cross-generic mutations which defy easy categorization. Broadly, however, it remains true that marketing and programme categories provide the base point from which most critical work on film and television genre proceeds. Clearly these are important categories in that they have come to define the narrative expectations on which genres play, but it is important to recognize their limitations.

How far can one go with a classification which includes *'Allo!*, *'Allo!* (1984–), *Blackadder* (1983–), and *M.A.S.H.* (1972–84), or *The Bill* (1988–), *Miami Vice* (1984–) and *Hill Street Blues* (1980–9) except to define each series as constituting its own generic subcategory? Such a definition may indeed give important critical insights into the immediate workings of individual series and into the system of expectations which they put into play, but it seems, in the end, to add very little to a theory of genre. Again, quite usefully, such classifications will throw into relief the difficulty in television of generalizing across national systems in the absence of the kind of international standard which classical Hollywood cinema has provided for the understanding of cinema. They also demonstrate the very considerable importance of scheduling and demographic targeting in establishing distinctions within broad categories: in order

to make sense of broad programmatic genres like soap opera or crime series it always seems necessary to identify them with a qualifying time-slot – daytime soap, early evening soap and prime-time soap; or, in Britain, pre-nine o'clock crime series (the tradition of *Dixon of Dock Green* (1955–76), *Juliet Bravo* (1980–9) and *The Bill* (1988–) and post-nine o'clock crime (the subgenres of *The Sweeney* [1974–8] and *Taggart* [1985–], and of the US imports). Broad generic categories, then, seem only to lead to narrower subgeneric subcategories, though that in itself may be a useful exercise in classification.

It is also clear from the case study of MTM, edited by Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi, that other agencies than genre have to be brought in to trace and explain consistencies within and across television series.¹⁹ There may be more significant consistencies to be traced across the corporate authorship of MTM in programmes like *Hill Street Blues* and *St Elsewhere* (1982–8), or across the individual authorship of Steve Bochco in *Hill Street Blues* and *L.A. Law* (1986–), than can be traced across hospital melodramas like *St Elsewhere* and, say, *Dr Kildare* (1961–6). More recently, *Twin Peaks* (1990–) may be less surprising in its unsettling mix of crime, pastiche and parody when it is recognized that its coauthor, Mark Frost, was also a script writer of the first *Hill Street Blues* series. In other words, studies of television genre begin to reinvent some of the wheels which film authorship and genre studies set in motion some time ago.

All of this may provide important insights into the functioning of particular programmes, series and programmes categories, and necessary tools in the critical analysis of television. It is the necessary end-point of the detailed study of television programmes. What it does not seem to me to offer, and what seems crucial for the intensely generic regime which television operates, is the beginning of a theory of genre specific to television which addresses not only the systems, but the forms of subjectivity which these systems imply. As a way of approaching such a theory, I want to step back from questions of programme categorization and return to prior questions of the poetics of genre in case there is something there which the more immediate premisses of popular genre have been missing.

In his very influential chapter on 'Literary genres' at the beginning of his book, *The Fantastic*, Todorov distinguishes 'three aspects of the literary work: the verbal, the syntactical, and the semantic'.²⁰ The verbal aspect, 'resides in the concrete sentences which constitute the text.' It relates both to 'the properties of the utterance itself', and to its 'performance, to the person who emits the text and to the person who receives it.' '(These problems', says Todorov parenthetically, 'have hitherto been studied in terms of "point of view")'²¹

19 Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi (eds), *MTM: Quality Television* (London: BFI Publishing, 1984).

20 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 20.

21 Ibid.

The syntactic aspect refers to,

relations which the parts of the work sustain among themselves (the old expression for this was 'composition') These relations can be of three types: logical, temporal, and spatial ²²

22 Ibid

The semantic aspect refers to the 'themes' of a literary text Although Todorov advances no 'general hypothesis' about the articulation of literary themes, he does, as a structuralist, believe them to be finite and knowable:

... we may safely assume that there exists some universal semantics of literature, comprehending the themes which are to be met with always and everywhere and which are limited in number, their transformations and combinations produce the apparent multitude of literary themes.²³

23 Ibid

Literary works are constituted by the complex interrelation of these aspects which can be isolated only in analysis. Although it may blunt some of the sharpness of the terms, we might map their literary specificity against terms traditional to film and television analysis such as 'style' (or 'mise-en-scene'), 'narrative structure', and theme. Importantly for the point I am making about the study of television genre, Todorov closes his summary of propositions thus:

The concept of genre must be qualified. We have set in opposition, on the one hand, historical and theoretical genres: historical genres are the result of an observation of literary phenomena, theoretical genres are deduced from a theory of literature Further, we have distinguished, within theoretical genres, between elementary and complex genres the former are characterized by the presence or absence of a single structural feature; the latter by the presence or absence of a conjunction of such features. Everything suggests that historical genres are a subgroup of complex theoretical genres ²⁴

24 Ibid p 21

This offers two distinctions which seem useful for thinking about television genre: a distinction, on the one hand, between historical and theoretical genres, and, on the other, between elementary and complex genres. It also implies a relationship between the two. Much of the writing about television fiction seems to me to remain at the level of elementary genres, grounded in the dominance of the semantic aspect, with relatively little analytic or historical attention to the 'verbal' (style, mise-en-scene) or the 'syntactic' (narrative structure): there is very little close textual analysis of television fiction, and there is no scholarly history of the development of television form to compare with the histories which have emerged of early cinema This may be an effect of the uncertainty around television's textuality, but it is now an extremely limiting effect for the development of theory.

With respect to the distinction between historical and theoretical genres, my concern here is with theoretical genres. For what follows, I want to suggest, first, that the study of observable, historical television genres – the largely elementary, predominantly thematic categories of television schedules – needs to be underpinned by a much more complex understanding than we presently have of the theoretical genre of ‘television narrative fiction’ to which they belong; and, second, that that understanding may best be approached by placing television narrative fiction in some definite historical and theoretical relationship to a yet wider generic category: that of novelistic discourse.

‘Of all the major genres’, says Bakhtin in his essay ‘Epic and the novel’,

only the novel is younger than writing and the book: it alone is organically receptive to new forms of mute reception, that is, to reading. .

This accounts for the extraordinary difficulty inherent in formulating a theory of the novel. For such a theory has at its heart an object of study completely different to that which theory treats in other genres. The novel is not merely one genre among other genres. Among genres long since completed and in part already dead, the novel is the only developing genre. It is the only genre that was born and nourished in a new era of world history and therefore it is deeply akin to that era, whereas the other major genres entered that era as already fixed forms, as an inheritance, and only now are they adapting themselves – some better, some worse – to the new conditions of their existence. Compared with them, the novel appears to be a creature from an alien species. It gets on poorly with other genres. It fights for its own hegemony in literature; wherever it triumphs, the older genres go into decline.²⁵

²⁵ M. M. Bakhtin, ‘Epic and the novel’ in M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* p. 3

²⁶ M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). The particular appropriation I am thinking of is John Fiske’s, in *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1988).

The work of Bakhtin has been ‘taken up’ in television writing – most problematically in some appropriations of the theory of carnival developed in *Rabelais and His World*²⁶ – and the critical vocabulary of the ‘chronotope’ and ‘the dialogic’ which is developed in his extensive work on literature, culture and language is beginning to achieve some deserved currency. What has not been developed to the same extent is the suggestiveness of his work on the novel for theories of genre, a suggestiveness which I will only touch on here, but which seems to me to be worth a great deal more investigation and discussion.

Bakhtin himself extends his concern and his enthusiasm from the novel – a particular form existing within a definite historical period – to a more extensive novelistic discourse of which the novel itself is only one historical development, a development which, in its complexity and ‘*polyglossia*’, most fully realizes the potential of the

²⁷ See Bakhtin 'From the pre-history of novelistic discourse', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp 41–83

genre.²⁷ The distinction is clearly similar to that between Todorov's historical and theoretical genres. What I am suggesting for an understanding of the workings of television generic fiction and its associated forms of subjectivity (or, indeed, of narrative cinema and its subjectivity), is that it may be more fruitful if we approach it as an historical development of the complex, theoretical genre of novelistic discourse rather than as a collection of autonomous elementary, historical genres. Just as Bakhtin, somewhat scandalously, traces the rise of the novel back to the romances and adventure narratives of Hellenistic Greece, so it may be useful, if equally scandalous, to think of film and television narratives as forward projections of the same novelistic discourse into new media using radically different technologies of transmission and reception. Such an approach is not at all for the sake of establishing some banal historical continuity, or of demonstrating a universal homogeneity of narrative; rather it allows precise tracings of specific historical shifts and distinct orderings of narrative and the novelistic, generic responses to historical, technological and social re-orderings. Bakhtin's enthusiasm for the novelistic is indeed inspired by its very responsiveness and its capacity to be changed.

Methodologically, the 'chronotope' – the specific organization of space and time within the work or within a genre – is at the centre of Bakhtin's tracings of the changes within genres and of the boundaries between them. 'The chronotope', according to Michael Holquist and Katerina Clark, 'both defines genre and generic distinction and establishes the boundaries between the various intrageneric subcategories of the major literary types'.²⁸

In his return to classical Greek narrative, for example, Bakhtin distinguishes three spatio-temporal regimes which, he argues, still leave traces in contemporary narratives: romance 'adventure time', the 'adventure time of everyday life' and 'biographical time'. In the ancient romance, the initial event (boy meets girl) and the final event (boy marries girl) are separated by a series of events which have no causal relationship and no natural location, and which, though they impede the relationship between the boy and girl, do not change it. The characters – if such a term is even appropriate – do not grow, the chronotope is 'characterized by a technical, abstract connection between space and time, by the reversibility of moments in temporal sequence, and by this interchangeability of space'.²⁹ In the adventure of everyday life, on the other hand, the characters are affected by the events (however fantastic) that befall them, and the progression of changes fixes the order of events, giving a materiality to space as the scene of transformation and metamorphosis: 'Space becomes concrete and saturated with a time that is more substantial'.³⁰ Biographical time, the most complex of the three, the most various in the chronotopal forms it takes, and the most influential on later developments of the novel, places

²⁸ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge Mass /London Harvard University Press 1984) p 280

²⁹ Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* p 100

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p 120

character at its centre, organizing space and time around it, variously tracing time as a spiritual or intellectual journey through a symbolic landscape, unfolding character through a series of acts and deeds, or tracing character through the different components of domestic and public life – family life, conduct in war, memorable sayings

Each of the three basic chronotopes which Bakhtin describes has resonances for later forms of the novelistic, and particularly for the generic forms of popular narrative. More generally, though, his discussion of these chronotopes exemplifies the way in which the shifting organization of space and time can be used to plot generic change.

David Bordwell, in his discussion of the classical Hollywood system, identifies a tripartite paradigm of devices, systems (system of narrative logic, system of time, system of space), and relations between systems. The classic Hollywood narrative, he proposes, in a manner quite similar to Bakhtin's, is defined by the centrality of a logic of causation to which character is central, and to which space and time are always subordinate: 'In the Hollywood style the systems do not play equal roles: space and time are almost invariably made vehicles for narrative causality'³¹ The novelistic of classical Hollywood cinema, that is, develops a chronotope in which time is cut to the economy of narrative causation and motivation, and space is the scene of narrative action.

As a starting point for thinking about the novelistic of television, I would propose a chronotope which, while retaining the centrality of character, frees space and time to a much greater extent from the strict service of narrative logic. More precisely, I would propose a chronotope, definitive for the development of a specific televisual novelistic, for which the foundational element is an interruptable time.

It should also be added immediately that this chronotope, this regime of space and time, is much less determinate than that of classical Hollywood, less regimented by the precise divisions of labour and skills and the forms of standardization appropriate to the particular kind of industrial production out of which 'classical' rules developed. In the absence of this 'classical' formation, we are looking for tendencies and trends much less sharply and universally defined, but no less definitive for tracing the particular mutation of the novelistic effected by television.

It should also be added that there is, of course, a history to all this, or rather, to complicate matters, there are several quite separate histories determined by the historical development of different national broadcasting systems. For British television drama, for instance, and for American television drama till the mid-fifties, a particular combination of live studio technology and a respect for theatrical naturalism placed time and space more at the service of

³¹ See David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 6.

performance than of narrative logic, seeking a continuity – rather than an interruptability – of time and space in which the actor could unfold the truth of the performance, or, more practically, in which mistakes on the studio floor could be minimized. Or, again, space figures differently in the socially responsible naturalism of a public service system, where it figures as a representation of a real environment, than it does in the ‘market’ realism of entertainment television where it functions as a scene for action. And, of course, there is a much shorter history of interruption in many European broadcasting systems than in the more fully commercial system of US broadcasting (and those histories show signs of reversal in new systems such as satellite and cable).

Each of these local conditions leaves traces in the development of television form – hence the difficulty of establishing general rules, or of defining a universal television, or even of predicating a classical standard. Nevertheless, within the variations and local conditions, if we are thinking in terms of a specifically televisual addition to the forms which the novelistic has taken since the Greek romance, the organization of narrative around the expectation of interruption seems to me to be central. Just as journal serialization affected the chapter formation and the structure of the nineteenth-century novelistic, so also the expectation of the break, mediated by the specific form of attention which audiences are believed to give to television, produces a mutation within the novelistic towards segmented narration. Unlike the novelistic of cinema or of the twentieth-century novel, the television novelistic is organized around interruption rather than around closure. This, though it is everywhere as various and as changeable as the biographical time which Bakhtin finds in classical Greek literature, can nevertheless still be identified as a distinctive and possibly definitive generic shift.

This suggests a number of avenues which historical and aesthetic research might pursue, or at least it offers a way of organizing and disciplining some intuitions. Most interesting, perhaps, is the extent to which attention to its organization of time around interruption and the consequent segmentation of its narrative might place television fictional genres or subgenres in a fairly continuous line of popular novelistic forms for which the feature film represents a break rather than an exemplary object. Think, for instance, of popular theatrical melodrama and the continual interruption of the narrative line by songs, displays, tableaux or ‘turns’, or of the short serialized forms of the early popular press, or of comic stories; or of the form of radio sitcoms until quite recently. Going back further, there are traditions of oral narrative and of theatre to which the organization of television around interruption and loose attention would be quite familiar. And even for the novel, closure at a single, uninterrupted sitting is the exception rather than the rule. Clearly, it is the concentrated and closed narrative form of the feature film that

³² I am grateful to Simon Frith for pointing this out to me

³³ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947), quoted in Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross 'Introduction', special issue on Everyday Life *Yale French Studies*, no. 73 (1987) p. 2

³⁴ Tania Modleski 'The rhythms of reception: daytime television and women's work' in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.) *Regarding Television* (Los Angeles: American Film Institute/University Publications of America, 1983), pp. 67–75

³⁵ Beverle Houston 'Viewing television: the metapsychology of endless consumption' *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* vol. 9 no. 3 (1984) pp. 183–95

is out of line, a rupture within a generic tradition of the popular novelistic from which television's mutations are more continuous ³²

Nor are these simply questions of the formal rules of genre and generic transformation. The importance of Bakhtin's method lies not simply in the formal identification of a genre or a subgenre or a chronotope, but also in the connection which he establishes between internal generic form and external history. If the everyday, as Lefebvre defines it, is 'whatever remains after one has eliminated all specialized activity',³³ then it is important to acknowledge television as most characteristically a part of the everyday (an everyday which, Lefebvre argues, is a historically limited phenomenon), characteristically occupying everyday time and only on 'special' occasions occupying 'special' time set aside for it and it alone. Tania Modleski, arguing within the specific context of women's work and the forms of daytime television, has suggested the ways in which an interruptable, segmented television narrational time might flow smoothly into the interruptions and segmented structures of a particular form of the domestic everyday, generic form nesting easily into the rhythms of everyday reception.³⁴ Situated within the everyday, television differs quite fundamentally from cinema which is still, characteristically, a 'specialized activity'. It may, however, be less different from other forms of everyday narrative activity (like gossip or conversation, for example).

All of these differences, and these different kinds of difference, echo, and are echoed in, the organization of narrational time. What they demonstrate, yet again, is the inappropriateness of theories which go no further than cinema, and frequently no further than film theory of the seventies, for an understanding of television's articulations of the novelistic. The significance of understanding these differences in their various material and historical forms seems to me to lie in the way they point to the difference of television's subjectivities.

The understanding of specific forms of subjectivity and specific processes of identification has always been mysteriously lacking or sadly disappointing (or depressingly familiar) in television theory. Here I want to draw attention to an article by Beverle Houston, 'Viewing television: the metapsychology of endless consumption',³⁵ which seems to me to be one of the few serious attempts to theorize television subjectivity, and one which deserves more attention. In it, Houston attempts to relate the familiar interruptions of television narration to questions of desire, differentiating the production of the subject specific to television from that of cinema:

It may be said that the social work of the cinema is to naturalize a certain sense of individual subjectivity by producing cinema-viewing as a timeless and abundant experience. This effect, of course, has a complex role in the circulation of money,

power and sexuality, but its direct role is that the spectator say: I want the cinema experience again. At the ideological level, the goal is to reinforce the unified subject as an intermediate step in reproducing a certain social world. This is *not* the definitive work of television. Its function is more directly linked to consumption, which it promotes by shattering the imaginary possibility over and over, repeatedly reopening the gap of desire. Television sets up an obsessive acting-out of desire, which the spectator tries to assuage by consuming the television text itself in its unique promise. Of television we say: I want it as I have never had it.³⁶

36 *Ibid.*, p. 184

The unique promise of television is of an availability which is not dependent on the presence of the image as is cinema's, but derives from its 'endless flow', available at the touch of a button even when the set itself is off. This flow, argues Houston, evokes a different moment from that of the specularity of cinema, suggesting instead,

the first flow of nourishment in and from the mother's body, evoking a moment when the emerging sexual drive is still closely linked to – propped on – the life-and-death urgency of the feeding instinct.³⁷

37 *Ibid.*

The flow of nourishment, then, is, for Houston, the formative figure for a psychoanalytic, or 'metapsychological', account of television's promise of full subjectivity, just as the mirror figures for the specular subjectivity of cinema. But, just as the cut projects the cinematic imaginary into the symbolic, so interruption, for television, marks the impossibility of the promise and the dream of endless flow.

The work of the symbolic, of the American television institution, in articulating this technical and imaginary possibility is to break it, interrupt, withdraw by separating the text into saleable parts, breaking up the promise of coherence and wholeness into short sessions, as it were, constantly jerking us out of the dream of coherent signifieds into the world of the endless play of signifiers. The symbolic reproduces this imaginary in discrete, regulated entities – small, discontinuous, easily consumable like the bits of information on a computer screen, like the items in the supermarket, like the small, framed and mirrored segments of the glass-skinned skyscrapers that offer us gleaming reflections of our lives from moment to moment in the high-income, high-tech regions of the American urban environment. TV offers, not access to an imagined coherence of a subject and a signified, but instead an extremely intense miming of the sliding and multiplicity of the signifier.³⁸

38 *Ibid.*, p. 185

Thus Houston attempts to think through the difference which television's textual specificity presents to theories of the

psychoanalytic and semiotic subject, while recognizing at the same time the interrelationship between that specificity and the specificities of institution and viewing. One of the implications of the argument, which there is not space to develop here, is the suggestive qualification which is offered to that familiar figure of cinematic theory, the Symbolic Father – *Nom du Père*, figure of the Law, administrator of knowledge and prohibition – by the determining centrality for television of the concepts of flow and nourishment and their symbolic association with the providing, mediating Mother. The analysis associated with the Name of the Father, castration and the Oedipal seems to me to have less purchase in thinking television than it has had for cinema.

Equally suggestive, and even more central to my argument, is a decisive shift in emphasis from the spatiality of the imaginary of cinema – an imaginary sustained by the image and threatened by the cut – to the temporality of television's promise of endless flow – an endlessness continually denied by interruption. That shift from the irreplaceability and loss imposed by the cut to the resumption always allowed by interruption suggests again something of the difference of television, and the inappropriateness of a theory of subjectivity which takes castration as a defining moment. It is here, in fact, that I have one reservation about Beverle Houston's article, around her use of the term, 'desire', and its place in the formation of the television subject. There is a distinction, originating in Freud and developed by Lacan, between 'need', 'demand' and 'desire' in which needs can be satisfied by the adequate object (food), demands, while aimed at an object, are addressed to others (the demand for love or attention disguised as a need for food), while desires have no real object, relate only to fantasy, and cannot be satisfied (the desire for unity and plenitude). It seems to me that the impossibility of desire, and its exclusive relation to fantasy, has to be qualified in the face of the possibility – always implied by interruption – of resumption, of a return to normal service. This possibility of resumption, of the fulfilment of the promise of endless flow temporarily threatened by interruption, seems to me to operate in a quite different way than the cinematic cut, occupying a different structure of time, a different relation to fantasy, and motivated less by desire, loss and lack. Television, of course, inherits much of the formal rhetoric of cinema, but the prohibition of the cut seems less central to it, and less definitive for its subjectivity, than the promise of its everyday availability. The terms of desire, fantasy and the unconscious as they have functioned for film theory seem to me to lose much of their explanatory power at the level of subjectivity and identification, and it may be, as Gillian Skirrow has suggested for video games, that television can be more adequately thought through a theory of object relations.³⁹

The point I am making, here, is tentative and preliminary: it is

³⁹ Gillian Skirrow 'Hellivision: an analysis of video games' in Colin McCabe (ed.), *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) pp 115–42

simply that, unlike cinema which is still a 'specialized activity', television's relation to the everyday seems more determining than its relation to fantasy. This limits, or complicates to a high degree, the explanatory force of a psychoanalytic discourse whose terms are founded on an Oedipal moment of lack, castration and desire. At the same time, this point of difficulty, like the difficulty surrounding value, needs to be thought through rather than thought around, complimented and qualified by ethnography rather than simply disqualified by it.

Thinking, then, of the novelistic discourse as a definite and historically extensive genre, I would suggest that the specific contribution which cinematic variations of the discourse made to the genre may have been the cut. While the subordination of time and space to narrative causality is shared with many literary forms, and while many twentieth-century literary and artistic forms adapt to their own purposes the principles of montage and the manipulation of time and space learned from cinema, the cut as a fundamental figure of the rhetoric and the immediate experience of narrative – field/reverse-field where the slash represents a cut, or the conventional point-of-view structure of look/object/look – gives cinema a generic specificity. The motivation which the cut institutes at the level of the movement from frame to frame in continuity editing is foundational for identification and subjectivity in cinema. This rhetoric, though in highly adapted forms, is subsequently shared with television. What television, on the other hand, adds to the history of novelistic discourse, its definitive contribution, is a particular development of the interrupted and interruptable narrative, a narrative form built on the principle of interruption and therefore organizing expectation and attention in the short segments which will soften the disruption of being interrupted.

Each of these generic and subgeneric additions, variations and mutations changes the economy and the ecology of the genre, its structures and its subjectivities adapting to the shifts in the chronotope. The results of the segmentation which follows from the expectation of interruptable time can be traced in the increasingly familiar forms of television fiction: an extended, rather than condensed form of the novelistic, in which attention is dispersed rather than concentrated; highly populated narrative communities in which causality is less essential than character to the sense of continuity; a narrative structure which need not end (because not driven by causality), but which, if it does end, may end arbitrarily. Each of these seems to derive something from the interruptable time of the television chronotope, and its consequently segmented narrative. The development of the television subgenre of the novelistic is not a completed form and may never reach classical definition, but it can be traced historically from forms of narrative inherited from radio, theatre and popular entertainment.

to forms more appropriate to the specific conditions of television

What I have tried to show in this section is that before we can fully understand the particular historical genres which appear under the labels of programme categories, and, even more importantly, before we can understand the forms of subjectivity which they imply, we need to place them in their historical and institutional relationship to the theoretical genre of novelistic narrative

Genre, verisimilitude and industry

In his article, 'Questions of genre', Steve Neale deploys Todorov's distinction between 'generic verisimilitude, on the one hand, and, on the other, a broader social or cultural verisimilitude' ⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Steve Neale 'Questions of genre' p. 47

Versimilitude is defined by Todorov as 'the individual text's conformity to a textual norm external to it', a conformity whose importance is that it 'produces the *illusion* of realism' ⁴¹ This illusion of realism can be the result either of the text's conformity to the rules of the genre (which Todorov associates with classicism) or with 'what readers believe is true' (which he associates with naturalism). In the latter, it is 'public opinion' – 'a scattered discourse that in part belongs to each of the individuals of a society but of which none may claim ownership' – which underwrites the verisimilitude of the text, allows its relationship to its referent to be probable, necessary, and therefore true, and naturalizes its conventions: 'Public opinion therefore functions as a rule of genre that relates to all genres.'⁴²

⁴¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1981), p. 18

⁴² *Ibid* p. 19

In a classical system, Todorov argues, several genres may claim their right to represent reality and each will have its own measure of verisimilitude to the extent that it conforms to its own internal rules. At the same time, public opinion may qualify and grade the measure of its 'realism', and some genres may be more 'verisimilar' than others 'In other words, the law of certain genres coincides with public opinion; but the latter does not have absolute rights' ⁴³

⁴³ *Ibid*

'The doctrine of naturalism', on the other hand, 'is situated at the opposite pole.'

The naturalists do not admit that they are referring to rules of genre; their writings must be *true*, not just likely. Actually, this signifies that the only rule admitted is that of public opinion. The direct consequence of this principle is the reduction of all genres to only one, if the rules of a genre contradict this verisimilitude, the genre is suppressed. In the doctrine of naturalism, there is no place for the poem ⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Ibid* pp. 19–20

Some of Todorov's terms are problematic: 'naturalism' has a difficult history, particularly for television; and 'public opinion'

assumes an integration of the audience which television increasingly recognizes as disintegrated. The underlying distinction, however, seems particularly suggestive for thinking about television

I have argued above that the absence of an international standard such as is provided for cinema by Hollywood makes it difficult to think of a classical system for television. Even within national systems, the structure of the television schedules, and the different interpretations which are given to different injunctions – with different degrees of force – to inform, entertain and educate, make it difficult to think of television as a single formal system. At the same time, using Todorov's distinction, it does seem possible in relation to television narrative genres or subgenres to identify classical tendencies which depend – in the last instance – on conformity to rules and conventions for their verisimilitude, and to distinguish them from naturalist tendencies whose verisimilitude makes claims to be grounded in social reality – or at least claims to represent what people believe to be true. It is, indeed, difficult to avoid the generalization that while classical tendencies are increasingly becoming the 'dominant' (in Jakobson's sense⁴⁵) in a commercial system such as that epitomized by US broadcasting, naturalist tendencies remain the dominant in the UK where public-service values retain an increasingly tenuous hold. Clearly there are exceptions and variations. On British television, for example, sitcom may be the narrative genre most resistant to generalization, including the 'classical' *Blackadder* as well as the 'naturalist' *Bread* (1988). British soap opera and crime series, on the other hand, are predominantly 'naturalist' in the sense in which Todorov uses the term. On US television, it may be the crime series subgenre which comes closest to naturalist verisimilitude, and certainly the eighties generation of *Hill Street Blues* and *Cagney and Lacey* (1981–8) seemed to resemble more closely what people believe to be true than the more apparently formulaic structures of *Kojak* (1973–7), *Starky and Hutch* (1975–80) and *Charlie's Angels* (1976–81) or the more obviously cinematic forms of *Dragnet* (1951–8). But this historic drift towards naturalist verisimilitude is constantly undermined – in the eighties generation of crime series, in daytime and prime-time soap, and in series like *Moonlighting* (1985–8), *thirtysomething* (1987–), or, most notoriously, *Twin Peaks* (1990–) – by a growing 'classical' inclination to 'play around with the conventions' through dream sequence, fantasy and self-reflexiveness. What can be said about the most recent generation of US television narrative subgenres is that they display on the screen a much higher awareness of the conventions they are operating than is the general rule on UK television, and they are therefore much more inclined towards an ironic or parodic re-scoring of generic regimes.

Two things can be said about this to avoid the impression that the different tendencies are simply expressions of a 'national character'.

⁴⁵ See Roman Jakobson 'The Dominant', in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds) *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1978) pp. 82–7.

or of the irresponsibility of entertainment against the social purposiveness of public service – though the latter explanation, if understood historically rather than morally, is not completely without foundation. In the first place, in aesthetic terms, Steve Neale follows Jakobson in relating the concept of verisimilitude to the question of generic change and transformation. Referring to literature, painting and language, Jakobson shows how the conventions which guarantee a form's verisimilitude and secure it in public opinion have temporal limits on their effectivity: through time, convention becomes cliché, picture becomes ideogram, genre becomes formula, and tradition becomes prison-house. Formulaic genres and clichéd conventions can no longer claim any purchase on vivid immediate reality, and hence lose their place in public opinion. Jakobson uses the analogy of language:

Everyday language uses a number of euphemisms, including polite formulas, circumlocutions, allusions, and stock phrases. However, when we want our speech to be candid, natural, and expressive, we discard the usual polite etiquette and call things by their real names. They have a fresh ring, and we feel that they are 'the right words'. But as soon as the name has merged with the object it designates, we must, conversely, resort to metaphor, allusion or allegory if we wish a more expressive term. It will sound more impressive, it will be more *striking*. To put it in another way, when searching for a word which will revitalize an object, we pick a farfetched word, unusual at least in its given application, a word which is forced into service.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Roman Jakobson, 'On realism in art', in Matejka and Pomorska (eds), *Readings in Russian Poetics*, p. 40.

If we follow this, the play with conventions, in television narrative subgenres as much as in language, may not simply be a classical (or postmodern) fascination with language games, but may also contain a 'naturalist' (or modernist) desire to revitalize forms that have become stale and hackneyed, and are no longer adequate to the world in which people believe. Generic playfulness in television is as likely to fall within the characteristically modernist desire for a modernization of expression as it is to constitute a postmodern avant garde, and the two should not be confused.

At the same time, the process of generic change is not simply an aesthetic question but is crucially inflected by the pressures and constraints of industry and institution. The relationship between industry and genre is widely accepted, though less widely researched. Here, I want to identify one feature of that relationship which seems to me to be crucial in understanding generic transformation in television, and the specific and different forms it takes in the US and the UK: the organization of the schedule.

At this precise stage of the development of UK television, defined by a limited number of channels (satellite and cable are not yet definitive) and by a continuing, fragile respect for the traditions of

public service, the schedule is still organized to allow the public to choose between a range of 'services'. By and large, and allowing for spoiling operations at key points in the evening, programmes are arranged within time-slots to avoid outright competition for the same demographic group or taste constituency. The choice presented to viewers tends to be *between* genres and subgenres rather than within them. At the present stage of development of US television, on the other hand, the schedules of the majority viewing channels (and this is of course complicated by the much wider dissemination of cable) are stripped in a way which concentrates particular genres and subgenres within the same time-slot the competition is directed quite blatantly at the same demographic group or taste constituency, and, characteristically, for the network viewer, the choice is *within* genres and subgenres rather than between them.

It seems to me that this difference in the structure of the schedules goes a long way towards explaining in industrial terms the relative stasis of British television subgenres like sitcom, crime series and soap opera, and the drive towards innovation found in the corresponding genres on US television. As long as *'Allo! 'Allo!*, *Last of the Summer Wine* (1974), or *Taggart* have their own audience and their own time-slot, why should they innovate? For US television, on the other hand, competition for the same audience within the same time-slot drives producers and planners to look for the new exploitation angle which will differentiate their product within the market, propelling genres and conventions along the track of transformation and mutation. Competitive market differentiation leads, then, in the same direction as the aesthetic process of verisimilitude towards innovation, generic mixing, mutation. But whereas *aesthetically* the transformation and revitalization of conventions may be motivated ultimately, even in its classical forms, by a desire for a verisimilitude guaranteed by 'public opinion', the need of the industry for new exploitation angles may exceed this aesthetic impulse, going beyond verisimilitude to the point where a series takes its significance not from an agreed or conventionalized similarity to the world, but from its difference to other series. Generic convention, that is, gives up its claim to refer to a world outside television, or to 'what people believe to be true', and internalizes its play. It is at this point that Todorov's 'classicism' is projected towards postmodernism. With *Twin Peaks*, the fascination is in watching, with mounting incredulity, the parodic games of multiple genres and thoroughly clichéd conventions, which are striking not through their revitalization of verisimilitude in new forms but through the unlikeliness and inappropriateness of their combination. For US television, such a postmodernism can be seen less as an aesthetic reaction to modernism than as part of the logic of a 'classical' concern with convention produced by an economic structure which needs product differentiation within a highly

competitive market. If US generic production seems more dynamic than that of the UK, it is because the economy is driven by difference as much as by repetition: while the one secures recognition of a welcome familiarity, the other differentiates this familiar object from all competitors and discovers the 'exploitation angles' which will make it different and completely unexpected within a genre and a medium which is all too familiar.

Generic parody

There is, then, an institutional as well as an aesthetic logic to the playfulness with generic convention which characterizes a growing number of US 'prestige' genre series and serials: the subversion of conventions is becoming conventional. Since it is supported by demographic shifts towards the breakup of the mass audience into niche markets, it is a trend which may become a continuing tradition. In part, it is simply a process of modernizing the rules of verisimilitude and refreshing its conventions. But if we are to understand it, and, particularly, if we are to distinguish within it between cynical accommodation and genuine playfulness, we are going to have to go beyond the embarrassingly inappropriate assumption that it has something to do with 'Brechtian' distancing or 'modernist' self-reflexiveness. That there are distanciations and self-reflexivities is apparent, but to attribute them mechanically to Brecht or to modernism is formalist in its most naive sense. I have suggested elsewhere that a more aesthetically and historically extensive theory of irony seems desirable for an understanding of television. Irony is at the same time a characteristic form of the contemporary imagination and a way of thinking the specific forms of engagement which the distractions of the everyday and the interruptions of its temporality might facilitate in television viewing.⁴⁷ Within a theory of irony, a theory of parody seems equally essential for understanding recent generic mutations. Such a theory of parody might point towards the conditions of existence – the possibilities and impossibilities – of television's difference and negation. Again, I can only indicate beginnings here, but the possibility of parody brings me back briefly, at the end, to the question of difference, repetition and value.

'Parody', says Linda Hutcheon,

in its ironic trans-contextualization and inversion is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the background text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony. But this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive. The pleasure of parody's irony comes not from humour in particular but from the degree of engagement of the reader in the

47 See John Caughie, *Playing at being American: games and tactics* in Pat Mellencamp (ed.), *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Bloomington/London: Indiana University Press/BFI Publishing, 1990), pp. 44–58.

intertextual 'bouncing' (to use E. M. Forster's famous term) between complicity and distance.⁴⁸

Such a bouncing of complicity and distance is a characteristic form of engagement in generically mixed forms such as *Hill Street Blues*, *St Elsewhere* or *thirtysomething*: a form of engagement in which identification and recognition are liable to be wrong-footed at any moment by ironic distance, and, at the same time, ironic distance is liable to be caught out by sudden empathetic recognition. In an early episode of *Hill Street Blues* the 'joke' of a 'nut' who thinks he is Dracula, complete with cape and thirst for blood, is caught out by the discovery that he has hanged himself in his cell. *thirtysomething* continually moves the viewer (particularly, it has to be said, the male, white, middle-class viewer of a certain age) in and out of identification with characters she-and-particularly-he would rather not be, and in and out of dilemmas she-and-particularly-he would rather not recognize. This unstable identification – much more unstable than the forms of identification usually associated with cinema – is reinforced by the much looser rules of engagement implied by television's interruptable time. While specific instances of such instability lack moment, little indications of the small 'incorrect' pleasures and uneasy recognitions on which niche-audience television thrives, nevertheless the bouncing of complicity and distance defines forms of identification and subjectivity which, in their turn, define television's capacity to be critical.

For Bakhtin, the radical force of the novelistic was grounded precisely in its capacity to put into play a multiplicity of languages, and parody opened up official discourse to travesty and irreverence:

For any and every straightforward genre, any and every direct discourse – epic, tragic, lyric, philosophical – may, and indeed must itself become the object of representation, the object of a parodic travesty 'mimicry'. It is as if such mimicry rips the word away from its object, disunifies the two, shows that a given straightforward generic word – epic or tragic – is one-sided, bounded, incapable of exhausting the object, the process of parodying forces us to experience those sides of the object that are not otherwise included in a given genre or a given style. Parodic-travesty literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of a reality that is always richer, more fundamental, and, most importantly, *too contradictory and heteroglot* to be fit into a high straightforward genre. . . . Ancient parody was free of any nihilistic denial. It was not, after all, the heroes who were parodied, nor the Trojan war and its participants, not Hercules and his exploits but their tragic heroization. The genre itself, the style, the language are all put in cheerfully irreverent quotation marks and they are perceived

49 Bakhtin, 'From the prehistory of the novelistic discourse', in *The Dialogic Imagination* p. 55

against a background of a contradictory reality that cannot be confined within their narrow frames.⁴⁹

For television, this sense of parody, in its generic playfulness, is distinct from the satirical forms characteristic of British television for which, despite their 'scandalousness', the truth is a fixed position from which public behaviour may be castigated and public morals improved. Bakhtin's parody is about unfixing. Its interest is in its potential to put official discourses into 'cheerfully irreverent quotation marks'. Television generic series, even the 'cheerfully irreverent' *Twin Peaks*, cannot simply be shoe-horned into parody, their 'weirdness' a guarantee of *heteroglossia* and travesty. The generic mixings and mutations, however, towards which television may have an aesthetic and an economic inclination do seem to provide the grounds for specific forms of parody. This seems to me to make parody and irony worth understanding more precisely.

But, to return one final time to Bakhtin, in case he is appropriated yet again to legitimate a selective and ludicrously ahistorical celebration of 'carnival':

In modern times the functions of parody are narrow and unproductive. Parody has grown sickly, its place in modern literature is insignificant. We live, write and speak today in a world of free and democratized languages; the complex and multi-levelled hierarchy of discourses, forms, images, styles that used to permeate the entire system of official language and official consciousness was swept away by the linguistic revolutions of the Renaissance. . . . [The] new languages provided only very modest space for parody: these languages hardly know, and now do not know at all, sacred words, since they themselves were born to a significant extent out of a parody of the sacred word.⁵⁰

50 Bakhtin 'From the prehistory of novelistic discourse', p. 71

Within the conditions and constraints of commercial or public-service television, the capacity of parody and irony to be critical or to negate the logic of commodification in any real sense is extremely limited. Within the everyday repetition of television—the routines of presentation, the everlasting serials, the standardizations of time-slot—difference has a short life, the unexpected quickly instituted as an expectation. Any desire for an avant-garde negation has to be framed by that context: a context which invites a combination of modesty and cunning—the bouncing of complicity and difference, for example—rather than the heroic agonism of the historic avant-garde, or the desperate formalism of the once-and-for-all 'progressive' text. It does not seem to me to address the problem to say that if the producers produce the programmes the audience will supply the criticism. This essay is not a search for the new progressive text, nor for the new 'sacred word' which will bring it into being. In suggesting ways in which the shifting structures of

repetition and difference can be traced, what it has attempted to do is to open up some new contexts, both theoretical and institutional, in which texts and genres can be thought, and to reopen some old points of difficulty which still serve as sticking-points against the slide into accommodation.

Not all 'soaps' are created equal: towards a crosscultural criticism of television serials

GABRIELE KREUTZNER AND ELLEN SEITER

In a period marked by rapid political developments, the advent of the single European market in 1992, and the call for the establishment of a 'common house of Europe' (Mikhail Gorbachev), questions of cultural identity have taken on an ever more pressing significance. While media and communication processes are undoubtedly of major significance in the formation of such identities, David Morley and Kevin Robins have pointed out that deterministic models of communication are quite inadequate to explain how such identities are constructed and maintained or changed.¹ In this article, we address the question of how particular forms of entertainment popular in the 1980s preconstitute cultural identities for their audiences. For the purposes of our microstudy, we will look at prime-time television serials deriving from two differing national and sociocultural contexts. We will investigate a television serial which has been extremely popular with its national audience, *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* (1985–90) of the public-service German network ZDF.² In comparison, we will discuss *Dallas* (CBS/Lorimar, 1978–) and *Dynasty* (ABC/Aaron Spelling/Fox-Cat, 1981–90) as examples of nationally and internationally successful US television serials of the 1980s. Our decision to compare prime-time serials across cultures is motivated by their intimate relationship to melodrama as a popular tradition appealing particularly to female audiences, and to critical discussions about the television serial's semantic and ideological openness. Our analysis is also motivated by

1 David Morley and Kevin Robins
'Spaces of identity
communication technologies and
the reconfiguration of Europe',
Screen vol. 30, no. 4 (1989) pp.
10–34

2 *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* has been
shown on Channel Four in the
UK, 1988–90

the troubling observation that the question of gender has yet again been repressed in recent discussions of national identities and television's role in their construction.³

We wish to situate our work within the context of feminist studies of the daytime soap opera and to extend its perspective to popular forms of melodramatic prime-time entertainment. Critics such as Tania Modleski, Charlotte Brunsdon and Carol Lopate were interested in the possibility that soap operas offered women an entertainment vehicle which was inextricably bound up in the problems in their lives caused by the split between public and private cultures, and the burden placed on women for the psychological nurture of the family.⁴ Initially, the main focus was on the representation of gender and women's oppression as portrayed in these programmes and as a motivating interest in the storylines. US daytime soaps have throughout their history emphasized women's relationships with one another to a much greater extent than other kinds of programming. Irna Phillips, one of the originators of the genre, devised all her early programmes with a matriarchal figure and a series of daughters or daughter figures.⁵ More recently, work on prime-time serials and on the internationalization of family melodrama has been less concerned with these issues. For example, a discussion of *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* in *East of Dallas* fails to problematize gender dynamics in the drama.⁶ It is our intention to apply feminist concerns to serial forms that can be subsumed only problematically under the generic signifier of 'soap opera' as a form of popular entertainment targeted at an audience constructed in exclusively female terms.⁷ More specifically, we will look at how gender relations are constructed in prime-time serial drama in the context of US network and German public-service television.

In what follows, we approach our examples in two stages: we situate each form in the respective context of a particular cultural technology and a specific media institution; that is, US network television as a commercial medium, and German public-service television. Then, we describe the popular traditions enshrined in specific forms of melodramatic prime-time entertainment in the eighties. These traditions account for considerable differences which are of major importance for the readings that can be produced from these texts.

Prime-time serials on US network television in the eighties

As a commercial medium, US network television is primarily interested in the production of profit by selling the largest possible audience to advertisers. In order to achieve this goal, the medium developed three main strategies for addressing the audience, each of

- 3 There are many excellent precedents for a consideration of the intersections of German nationalism and gender ideologies published in *New German Critique*. e.g. Miriam Hansen's 'Dossier on Heimat', nos 36-7 (1985) and in works such as Klaus Theweleit *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
- 4 Tania Modleski 'The search for tomorrow in today's soap opera' *Film Quarterly*, no. 1 (1979), pp. 12-21. Charlotte Brunsdon, 'Crossroads: notes on soap opera' *Screen* vol. 22 no. 4 (1981), pp. 32-7. Carol Lopate 'Daytime television: you'll never want to leave home', *Radical America*, no. 11 (1977) pp. 33-51. and Ellen Seiter, 'Eco's TV guide - the soaps' *Tabloid* no. 4 (1982) pp. 35-43.
- 5 Ellen Seiter 'To teach and to sell: Irna Phillips and her sponsors, 1930-1954' *Journal of Film and Video* vol. 4 no. 1 (1989), pp. 21-35.
- 6 See Michael Hofmann's analysis in Allesandro Silj et al., *East of Dallas: The European Challenge to American Television* (London: BFI, 1988) pp. 142-8.
- 7 The argument for a careful distinction of differing forms of television serial drama is made by Robert C. Allen 'Bursting bubbles: soap opera audiences and the limits of genre' in Ellen Seiter et al. (eds) *Remote Control: Television Audiences and Cultural Power* (London/New York: Routledge Chapman & Hall, 1989), pp. 44-55.

which depended on placing given shows within the network schedule. The first of these strategies addresses the television audience as female. This strategy clearly dominates network television's daytime production and determines the characteristics of daytime texts. Although daytime shows (such as soap operas) are actually watched by women and men, interviews with network researchers and production personnel of daytime soap operas in 1987 showed that producers and network executives (still) consider the male audience during daytime as negligible.⁸ The second strategy addresses the television audience as a familial one. This mode of address dominates the early evening hours. Evidence for this strategy is provided by recalling the debate about the so-called family hour in the 1970s or by looking at the situation comedy as the genre which dominates this time-slot.⁹ The hours after ten p.m. are determined by a third strategy which constructs the audience as 'adult'. Generally speaking, texts within that time-slot used to follow what one might call the 'sex and crime' formula. Up to the second half of the 1970s, it was dominated by the crime, detective and lawyer genres, that is by generic texts culturally coded as 'male'. In terms of the narrative form preferred within these time-slots, the television serial – with its characteristic resistance to closure and its multiple-plot structure – was and is the dominant fictional narrative on daytime television. Until the second half of the 1970s, prime-time slots used to be the exclusive domain of the episodic series.

The combination of narrative form and strategic mode of address leads to two well-known interrelationships: the first between the open serial narrative and an address to an audience constructed as female; and the second between the narratively self-contained episodic series and an audience constructed in familial or adult, that is, in male terms. This well-established nexus began to be untied in exactly that time-slot designed to reach an 'adult' audience in the 1980s.¹⁰ The success of the prime-time serial *Dallas* caused the production of a whole wave of *Dallas* 'successors', all of which combined serial form and a synthesis of the figures of the extended family and the corporation as narrative subject. Instead of regarding these serials as a modification of the US daytime soap opera, we suggest that it is more productive to consider them as an expression of significant changes within the category of texts geared towards an adult audience. In this context, it should be noted that the similarities between prime-time serials and other shows for 'adult audiences' are not restricted to their position in the television schedule. Rather, we are confronted with a category of texts determined by a common mode of production (on 35mm film) and by a considerable number of shared visual characteristics and generic conventions.¹¹ Moreover, prime-time television's appropriation of the serial narrative was not limited to texts in a melodramatic vein, such as *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, but spread out to shows like *Hill Street*

⁸ The interviews were conducted in the context of the research project 'Soap operas on American television', based at the department of American Studies, University of Tübingen, and funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

⁹ The sitcom's preference for an address to a familial audience is discussed by Jane Feuer 'Narrative form in American network television' in Colin MacCabe (ed.), *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1986), pp. 101–14.

¹⁰ It must be noted however that these modifications with regard to narrative formats were not restricted to the time-slot after 10 p.m. see *ibid*.

¹¹ Details are given in Ellen Seiter 'Von der Niedertracht der Hausfrau und der Größe der Schurkin' *Frauen und Film*, no. 42 (1987) pp. 35–59 and Gabriele Kreutzner, *Die Fernsehserie Dynasty: Untersuchungen zu einem populären Text im amerikanischen Fernsehen der achtziger Jahre* (Trier: WVT forthcoming).

Blues (NBC/MTM, 1981–7), *St. Elsewhere* (NBC/MTM, 1982–8), *L.A. Law* (NBC, 1986–) and, quite recently, to the latest fad on US network television, *Twin Peaks* (NBC, 1990–1) initially directed by David Lynch.

Serials produced by public-service television: the case of *Die Schwarzwaldklinik*

Die Schwarzwaldklinik was conceived and produced at a time when the public networks, ARD and ZDF, were becoming increasingly concerned about their future. At that point, commercial channels outside West Germany, such as RTL in Luxembourg, could be received in a limited number of areas in (West) Germany. The response to these commercial channels by (regional) audiences was watched and anxiously researched by the public networks. Soon, studies revealed that viewers who could receive the new channels were rapidly changing their attitude towards commercial television. Having initially complained about the frequent advertising breaks they soon expressed their acceptance of the commercial channels, mainly because they provided them with a wider variety of choices among (US) theatrical films and television series.

In their study of differing national television productions in Europe, Alessandro Silj et al. conclude that the influence of audience ratings on 'the decisions taken by those responsible for programming is a relatively recent phenomenon'.¹² However, a consideration of the context in which the conception and production of *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* took place suggests a rather different perspective. While audience ratings have always played a role in the decisions taken by (public) network executives, the advent of commercial channels radically changed the conditions of competition in (West) Germany. Because of 'the need to minimize costs and as a result of the initial[ly] very low coverage in the "cable ghetto"', the new commercial channels offered a television schedule which consisted predominantly of (US) theatrical films and television series.¹³ In contrast to the commercial channels' policies, the public networks (financed by licence fees and only partially through advertising) operate under the legal obligation to provide not only 'entertainment', but also educational, political and other material 'in the public interest'. However, in contrast to their commercial competitors who started out with small audiences and limited budgets, the public networks' well-established position enables them to rely on a broad national audience and a much larger budget. Unlike the commercial channels, they can afford to offer fictional entertainment made in Germany (which is much more expensive than purchasing and dubbing US television shows). Thus, *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* was made with the expectation that such a

¹² Silj et al. *East of Dallas* p. 202.

¹³ Udo Michael Kruger, 'US productions on West German commercial television' in Christian Thomsen (ed.), *Cultural Transfer or Electronic Imperialism? The Impact of American Television Programs on European Television* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1989) p. 78.

'homegrown' series would not only attract a large national audience, but would also give ZDF the edge over commercial channels. In short, *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* was conceived not only as a 'homegrown' competitor to popular US prime-time serials like *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, but also as public television's alternative to the much bemoaned 'Americanization' of the German media.

Die Schwarzwaldklinik was at once very popular and very expensive. Scheduled on Saturday at 7.30 p.m., it was designed as a 'family show', aimed at attracting the broadest possible audience. Like the US prime-time serials of the 1980s, was not targeted at women, as daytime soap operas are in the US, where women between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine are singled out as the 'purchasing agents' for the household.

For readers not familiar with German public television, it is important to describe the type of schedule in which *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* made its appearance. It was scheduled as one of the prime-time programmes which included theatrical films (mainly US and German from the 1930s onwards), weekly *Krimis* (crime series), studio variety shows, game shows, political and cultural magazines, and productions such as *Aktenzeichen XY Ungelöst* (ZDF, 1976), the prototype for recent US shows such as *America's Most Wanted* (NBC/Fox, 1988-) and *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC, 1988-). At that time, only one other serial, *Die Lindenstrasse* (ARD, 1985-) followed a serialized melodrama format, but this show was heavily steeped in domestic realist traditions (as well as following the model provided by British soap operas) and was not broadcast during prime time. Family melodrama tends to figure primarily as background story in popular German and European crime series (such as *Tatort* (ZDF, 1971-) or *Eurocops* (ZDF, 1988-) where it explains a crime's motivation but remains peripheral to its investigation. It is significant that (public) programming produced in Germany, with its emphasis on 'something for everyone', provides something less for women. It was only through the rise of the commercial channels that daytime soap operas (from the US as well as from South America) have been imported and now form a part of the daytime television schedule. With regard to the overall programming, there is a decidedly male orientation to most of the American imports.

For ZDF, as a public broadcasting institution, *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* provided a means of securing large audiences for a domestic production. The high ratings of US series are often bemoaned and overestimated: as Silj et al. have shown, domestic programmes always beat US ones when they are available, and one audience study discovered that German viewers found *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* more pleasurable than *Dallas* or *Denver-Clan* (the dubbed German version of *Dynasty*) even though they might watch all three. In a sense, the success of the US imports provoked

the producers of *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* to produce a certain version of and a certain over-emphasis on 'Germanness', a point which we will discuss below

Die Schwarzwaldklinik* and the traditions of the *Heimat* and *Ärztetfilm

Die Schwarzwaldklinik was a 'homegrown' television product in that it combined elements of popular national genres and traditions with conventions of US prime-time serials. For example, the title sequence mimicked *Dallas* with its jaunty theme music, its use of split-screen landscape shots and aerial photography of the stories' buildings and locations, and there is a heavy reliance on local colour. The title shots already suggest that this is an insular, geographically remote world, confined to the hospital building and the household of Professor Brinkmann, the new director of the hospital. Through the programme's several seasons and revivals, individual scenes became shorter. In looking at the first year's episodes, however, the scene length and especially the absence of 'mini-climaxes' which precede the commercials and which are so prominent in US daytime soap operas and which have been taken up by prime-time serials, are striking – particularly for an American viewer. In many ways, *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* was more in tune with the conventions of German television production, with its emphasis on sequence shots preserving the integrity of the actor's performance and a slow build-up through dialogue, than with US serials such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.

Die Schwarzwaldklinik was also less serialized than its US counterparts. In an astute analysis of the programme's first season, Rotraut Hoepfel demonstrates the gradually increasing reliance on serialized narratives and the decreasing number of discrete 'guest star' appearances. Guest stars (frequently prominent German actors) appeared in single episodes which typically included three aspects (roughly, a tragedy, a melodrama and a comedy) involving patients whose stories would be completed during the episode. The cast of characters also owed much to the functional format of the episodic series set in an institutional environment (a clinic, a hotel and so on): chief doctor (Professor Brinkmann), young doctor (son Udo), nurse/love interest (Christa); elderly woman housekeeper to the Brinkmann family (Katie); irksome administrator; stuff head nurse, handsome lovable conscientious objector (Mischa). As the producer Rademann explained, the clinic was the focus of the series, 'not only a first-rate transfer point for fate, but also a collection spot for the different characters. Every viewer can find something amusing in each episode: older women like Katie, young girls like Mischa, young intellectuals identify with Udo and his struggles with women's liberation'. In this respect, the show bears a strong resemblance to certain Aaron Spelling productions of the 1970s and 1980s which

were shown on ZDF: *Hotel* (ABC/Warner/Aaron Spelling, 1983–), *Love Boat* (ABC/Spelling-Goldberg, 1977–) and *Fantasy Island* (ABC/Spelling-Goldberg, 1977–82). We will return to the specific configuration of the family melodrama, which involves a striking Oedipal conflict between Udo and Professor Brinkmann, and to the position of women in the narrative, after considering the popular traditions that *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* drew upon.

Heimatfilm refers to a genre particularly popular during the Third Reich, in the 1950s and recently reworked in many different forms (including the mini-series *Heimat* [ARD, 1984]) in German film and television. Typical themes of the *Heimatfilm* are agrarianism, the importance of a spiritual tie to the land and the decadence of the urban and the intellectual. In *Der verlorene Sohn* (*The Prodigal Son*, 1934), a prototype of the genre, Toni leaves his home in the Bavarian mountains with an American femme fatale, Lillian, who has asked him to take her on a dangerous mountain tour. When a friend who accompanies them is killed, Toni refuses to return home and leaves for New York. In Manhattan, he faces unemployment, eviction and destitution. When he meets Lillian again, she claims she still loves him but cannot live in Europe. Toni decides to return home. He arrives during a winter solstice celebration and, since everyone is wearing folk masks (strong National Socialist connotations here), he disguises himself. Despite the disguises, he and his hometown sweetheart recognize one another and are reunited. The film very explicitly codes the city, the US and corruption as female; the mountains, Germany and folk values as male. This structure is mapped out on a male *Bildungsroman* (filled with phallic symbolism – from the tree trunks of the forest to the skyscrapers of Manhattan): as the local teacher says ‘You have to leave in order to come home’. Thus, the hero is reintegrated into the homogeneous community of the mountains, reunited with the land, with his paternal inheritance and with the local girl who will bear him children.

In the pilot episode of *Die Schwarzwaldklinik*, ‘Die Heimkehr’ (The Homecoming), *Heimat* conventions are very apparent. In the opening scene, Professor Dr Klaus Brinkmann and his housekeeper, Katie, drive along the steep, winding roads of the Black Forest before pulling over to look at the view. Brinkmann remarks that he has not been back since his father’s funeral. Gazing down at the clinic below, he says philosophically ‘birth and death, luck and bad luck, pain and joy: all the things that make up our lives’. Thus begins a reattachment of Professor Brinkmann to the nuclear family and to his *Heimat*. While his words occupy the traditional terrain of the melodrama – fate and emotion within the family – they also convey his privileged mastery over them. Later in the pilot episode, we learn that Professor Brinkmann’s wife (Udo’s mother) is dead, that he has travelled throughout Europe, practising in Paris, Zurich

and Karlsruhe, and that he has recently ended a relationship with his anaesthetist girlfriend. After scratching his finger on a rusty nail, he enters the hospital for the first time in 'disguise' (as a patient), observing his new employees incognito. The return under an assumed identity, the connection between land and his paternal inheritance are, therefore, quite explicit. Although later episodes are unable to repeat this premise precisely, the themes of *Heimat* remain, and Professor Brinkmann is often placed in a situation where he passes as a local, while keeping his distinguished identity a secret. It is important that the pilot episode made these familiar generic patterns so explicit. In later episodes, like a good son of the *Heimat* films, when troubled or out of sorts, Professor Brinkmann takes a hike on the hills.

In a later episode, he finds an old man (a *Landstreicher*/hobo) using his cabin, but Professor Brinkmann pretends he too is living off the land and humbly takes lessons about gardening and making soup. Over and over again, he enjoys a special closeness with 'peasant' figures: elderly men with thick Swabian accents; farmers, hobos. There is only one ethnicity in this fictional Black Forest: that of true Germanness, of traditional life. 'Guestworkers', immigrants and radicals (anyone who might challenge the authority of the good doctor) have no place in this world. Thus, local colour (of the guidebook kind) emphasizes the preindustrial agrarian nature of the Black Forest and forms the background of many episodes. Fishing, swimming and hiking are the rewards that await the hard-working doctors during their leisure time, and these scenes precisely reproduce the visual conventions of the travel brochure. Emotional states are projected onto the landscape, with pathetic fallacy being commonly used. After Udo was rehabilitated as a character, in part due to his discovery of true love with a simple, earthy, uneducated and uncomplicated woman (nanny to his infant half-brother), the couple regularly commune with nature and their sexual relationship is approvingly associated with the outdoors. Indeed, the association with nature helps to naturalize the astonishing blatancy of the incestuous themes within the Brinkmann family.

A 1988 episode makes the *Heimat* themes explicit. Brinkmann has had a minor heart attack and is housebound while Christa (who has attended medical school, become a doctor at the hospital, married him and given birth to their son) is out working. The first part of the episode focuses on his predicament at home, with nothing but time on his hands. His medical competence is in complete contrast to his incompetence in the house. He changes diapers awkwardly, plays the piano badly; begins talking too much at meals; and irritating everyone else in the family with his complaining and restlessness. In the end, he leaves for the United States to see a specialist hoping he can return to work. Disappointed by his wife's lack of attentiveness, he meets an attractive woman on the plane, who turns out to be a

local Black Forest girl, a 'farmer'. In San Francisco, he discovers the modern city as technological nightmare: airports, skyscrapers, and the hospital (the doctor Brinkmann visits has his office in a skyscraper). It is an entirely impersonal world and he is very anxious to leave, a situation which again strongly echoes the wanderings of the hero in *Der verlorene Sohn*. The woman he meets on the plane invites him to a barbecue on an enormous ranch complete with country and western singers. German viewers know this United States for it is Southfork. Brinkmann and his new flame hire a mobile home and set out for the Grand Canyon. The United States is represented in landscape symbolism by a valley – the inverse, mirror image of the German mountains that are his home. But there is a great economy here in this symbolism (United States, valley, feminine – Germany, mountains, masculine) representing the United States as the opposite of German culture and values, and doing so by geographic symbolism (another hallmark of German film). In a shot reminiscent of his arrival in the Black Forest during the pilot episode, Professor Brinkmann stands at the precipice, above the valley, gazing below, and floats a paper airplane down into the canyon before heading back home.

As in the *Heimatfilm* of the 1950s, these elements are conservative through and through. The Black Forest is here an idyllic world where, not coincidentally, everyone knows his place, and is satisfied with it. The people honour traditions and celebrate their very own Professor Brinkmann, who is at the centre of this order of things.¹⁴

14 Rotraut Hoepfel: Halbgötter in Weiß – Zur Faszination des Arztes in Film und Fernsehen. in: AV Medienpädagogik 615. Protokolle 1986. Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft für Jugendfilmarbeit und Medienerziehung e.V. 1986. p. 52 (our translation).

Some of the classic themes of the medical story (as in the German *Arztfilm*) are interwoven with the conventions of the *Heimatfilm*. Professor Brinkmann replaces the now outdated figure of the aristocrat whose place he still occupies structurally within the narrative and who proves both his wisdom and the justification of his exalted position by showing that he is still in touch with ordinary people and the countryside. Medical stories about the impact of modern life, or modern technology on individuals are always set against this background. Patients routinely arrive at the hospital as a result of hair-raising car accidents at high speeds along the curvy mountain roads of the Black Forest. But these are often played off against another story, about elderly peasants who are also patients of the hospital, who cling to the old ways and who have arrived on foot or by bicycle.

In an episode entitled 'Sterbehilfe' (Mercy Killing), Professor Brinkmann is called to testify at a hearing involving an old childhood friend accused of mercy killing. His friend is a 'country doctor' who still delivers cows as well as babies, and objects to the use of 'unnatural' technological means of prolonging life. Professor Brinkmann is able to prove that he still understands life – that he is

not a mere slave to the advanced technology we so often see at the hospital, and his testimony essentially absolves his friend. He is equally committed to protecting the old ways and helping to translate and explain the need for the new to his worried, frightened patients. He can also be tough when he has to – he angrily reprimands his son Udo for his personal and professional behaviour. While father and son regularly display a murderous rage in their interactions, the problem eventually turns out to be reconcilable. Udo sees that his womanizing interferes with his practice of medicine. Initially portrayed as intensely resentful of his father at work (he describes his father to another intern: ‘He knows everything. He makes you feel like nothing.’), Udo’s admiration for his father’s skill and knowledge ultimately wins out, and he too grants Professor Brinkmann the status of natural authority.

Popular traditions, narrative form and popularity

Like the German serial, the US prime-time serials of the 1980s also relied on popular traditions, in this case ones pre-existing in US media culture. It was the Hollywood family melodrama of the 1950s which served as the model for successful serials such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*.¹⁵ Thus, in an era determined by the political shift towards conservatism, both media systems revitalized traditions which had been successful during the restoration phase of the 1950s. In both countries, the war period arguably meant a ‘disturbance’ of the patriarchal order in so far as women were called upon to hold social positions and responsibilities usually reserved for men. Following this period of considerably altered social positions for women, the patriarchal order had to be firmly restored in the fifties. In that process, popular entertainment was undoubtedly of major importance. But if the German *Heimatfilm* and *Arztfilm* unequivocally confined women to their ‘natural’ place as housewives and mothers, and if both German genres reinstated the ‘good’ patriarchs and male authority figures, the Hollywood family melodrama arguably suggested much more ambivalent lessons about patriarchy and the family to its female audience.

Die Schwarzwaldklinik asked viewers to admire Professor Klaus Brinkmann as the lovable incarnation of the patriarchal order. Plots and stories around his son Udo or guest stars featuring as Professor Brinkmann’s old school buddies practise what Roland Barthes called innoculation: ‘One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small innoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion’.¹⁶ Within the framework of sanctified patriarchy, a small dose of sexism is introduced, the better to convey the sense that the system still really works, as represented by the ideal man, Professor

15 See Jane Feuer ‘Melodrama, serial form and television today’ *Screen* vol 25 no 1 (1984), pp 4–16, for a detailed analysis see Kreutzner, *Die Fernsehserie Dynasty*

16 Roland Barthes, ‘Myth today’, in Susan Sontag (ed.), *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang 1983) p. 140

Brinkmann. It is hardly surprising that female characters who do not fulfil the norm of an unthreatening and acceptable femininity are negatively evaluated. One of Udo's fiancées, a dedicated doctor, was constantly denounced as a women's libber; the clinic's head nurse was cast as the stereotypical old termagant sticking her nose into everybody else's business. Even Professor Brinkmann's love interest and later wife, Christa, virtuous in her uncomplicated femininity, was narratively abused in order to heighten the patriarch's glory. By the serial's third season, Christa, a former nurse who has meanwhile become a doctor herself, is practising medicine full time. In scene after scene, we are made to feel the wrongness of her placing her professional commitments first. Eventually, her son develops a psychosomatic illness and she cuts back to half time. But Christa's sufferings – and they are many – form only a kind of feminine dystopia to the background of Professor Brinkmann's control of the family and the world. In one episode, Christa must face a suicidal woman patient who, after picking up her beloved father from a long stay at the clinic, and convincing him that she could drive despite her inexperience, is involved in a car accident which fatally injures him, moments after leaving the clinic. Christa tells the woman that her father was dying of cancer anyway, and the patient is cured. But her husband, Professor Brinkmann, harshly rebukes Christa for 'playing God' – a role that he himself has assumed so gracefully throughout the series.

Die Schwarzwaldklinik presented an archaic, idealized rural microcosm in which harmony and order signified the familial status quo. While that harmony was threatened by events and happenings within the plot structure, the narrative (with the single episode and beyond) ultimately worked towards the reconciliation of contradictions and conflicts within the hospital community and the Brinkmann family. Compared to such a politics of representation, US prime-time serials such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* confronted viewers with chaos and conflict as the usual state of things, both within the public (in this case, the corporate) and the familial sphere. Here, contradictions and conflicts are not resolved by containing them within the family, since 'the family is the very site of economic struggle and moral corruptions'.¹⁷ Jane Feuer's analysis of strategic differences in dealing with the family between the episodic series format (exemplified, in her analysis, by the US situation comedies of the 1970s) and the melodramatic prime-time serials can be made productive for our comparison between the German television product and its US counterparts. If the German and the US forms are both constituted by television's 'economically derived need for perpetual self-reduplication', *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* is much more closely related to the episodic format of the US sitcom in that both forms depend upon the

17 Feuer 'Melodrama, serial form and television today'

continual reintegration of the family.¹⁸ In contrast to this, self-replication in the US prime-time serials depends upon the continual disintegration of the family.¹⁹ And whereas the US family sitcom of the 1970s tried to convey its 'liberal' messages within the narrative framework of the episodic series, *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* combined that (narratively) conservative form with a revitalization of extremely problematic traditions.

Critical work on US prime-time serials points to a close interrelationship between the paradigmatic change towards the serial form on US network television and a tendency within serial texts to be open to multiple readings. In the case of the melodramatic US prime-time serial, it can be argued that its narrative openness is inextricably related to a greater openness in terms of gender relations and to its allowance of and fascination with female transgressions. In our view, these characteristics account for much of its popularity, especially with its female audiences. However, one should not conceive of such textual characteristics of these serials as a cause for critical praise of their 'democratic' qualities. A better way of understanding such textual traits is to consider a serial like *Dynasty* as a new kind of bricolage, that is, as an assemblage of bits and pieces of various forms combined into a new textual structure, designed to meet specific economic and cultural requirements.

But what are these requirements and how do they manifest themselves in a given prime-time serial made in the US? A general answer is provided by considering the commercial character of US network television and the specific sociocultural context in which it must operate today. In this respect, we have to bear in mind that US prime-time television searches for the largest possible audiences of viewers in a society and culture marked by a particularly high degree of heterogeneity, if not fragmentation. Consequently, the interest of selling the largest possible number of viewers to advertisers ultimately requires some kind of acknowledgement of the audience's sociocultural diversity. This does not mean, however, that US television producers and network executives consider all audiences equally desirable. Desirability is measured in terms of the viewer's capacity for consumer spending. Thus, economically affluent sub-audiences (among them women holding high positions in the workforce) whose cultural identity is not identical with that constructed by the traditional television text (that is, that of a white, male heterosexual) have increasingly gained significance for advertisers and, consequently, for the networks. The introduction (and success) of the prime-time serial in the 1980s arguably suggests that the narratively self-contained episodic series geared towards an audience constructed in male, white and heterosexual terms has become inadequate to meet the cultural requirement of allowing for meanings and pleasures to be produced by prime-time television's heterogeneous audiences.

The historical and cultural specificity of the situation which facilitated the US prime-time serials' rise to popularity becomes evident by a comparison to the situation established by the tradition of German public programming. The number one 'home-made' popular form which even occasionally wins the praise of television critics is that of the crime series. Until recently, programmes made for women simply did not exist on German television with the rare exception of an occasional fashion show broadcast on Saturday afternoon. Apart from US and South American soap operas which were introduced under pressure from commercial channels in the 1980s, a female audience is addressed by public-service television in the early evening hours in only one case (while stressing that men are not excluded from the show): that is by *Mona Lisa* (ZDF, 1988–), a magazine show broadcast on Sunday evenings at 6.10 p.m. It is ironic that the German public television system, with its explicit obligation to do justice to the variety of 'socially and politically relevant' groups and perspectives, could simply neglect the cultural interests and preferences of (more than) half of the German population for more than thirty years.

It is this context which may help to explain why *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* gained such popularity, particularly with a female audience. It may also be that the choice of an upper middle-class family invited more identification on the viewer's part than the outrageously conspicuous consumerism which characterizes the fictional US family clan. But if US prime-time serials such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* – and, to an ever greater extent, *Knots Landing* (CBS, 1979–) – are marked by concessions to a female audience in that they have taken on board the daytime soap opera's traditional emphasis on female friendships and solidarity, no such love and friendship are on offer in *Die Schwarzwaldklinik*. The show is based on Professor Brinkmann's relationships with his hospital staff and domestic staff, son Udo and wife Christa. At the outset Christa has been dating Udo and discovers that he is unfaithful. By the Christmas break, Christa and Professor Brinkmann are married, and Udo is engaged to another doctor at the hospital. Christa is competent, scrupulous and, most important of all, equally committed to emotional caretaking as well as to medicine. This emotional sensitivity is particularly apparent in her treatment of female patients, who are often suicidal or deeply disturbed. Christa is a model of uncomplicated femininity – unlike Udo's fiancée, who is shown to be overly career-oriented and self-centred. This basic structure of *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* allows Christa no relationships with equals: for the other nurses, she is the boss's wife; at home, she is the housekeeper's 'boss', always retaining a respectful distance from the family servant; and she has no relatives of her own. She is allowed no lateral relationships, no friendships with other women, no time 'off the job' as she goes from looking after

her husband and stepson/ex-lover at the hospital to looking after them at home

This is in striking contrast to the celebration of Professor Brinkmann's male bonding with staff and guest stars on the show he hits it off immediately with men of all classes and ages, and enjoys basking in their praise. Christa has no women to confide in. Some episodes underline the hostility or abuse she has to face at work – much of it is 'sexual harassment', but this is difficult to dramatize because she is so isolated as a character. Christa must endure such hardships as Udo accusing her of administering the wrong medication just so that she will continue to date him, and the clinic's head (filling in for Professor Brinkmann who is on sick leave) harshly challenging both her husband's and her own diagnosis. Christa seems tense, extremely controlled, rigidly conservative, rule abiding and anxious (and who wouldn't be under such circumstances?) Any form of feminine solidarity is a structural impossibility in her world. Later on, Udo occasionally notices her difficulties and intervenes on her behalf with his father. But again, her dramatic conflicts are overlaid onto those of the father–son story: Christa and her problems function primarily in the narrative as grist for the Oedipal mill. There are some parallels between Christa and Krystle Carrington of *Dynasty*: both women exemplify one form of what Julia Lesage has called the 'hegemonic female fantasy', in this case marrying the boss.²⁰ It is at any rate an extremely conservative fantasy, but made much more so by the firm and unchallenged position of Professor Brinkmann. As we will see, Krystle's husband, Blake Carrington, suffers far more outrageous upheavals, more formidable female opponents and more open challenges to his authority.

²⁰ Julia Lesage, 'The hegemonic female fantasy in *An Unmarried Woman and Craig's Wife*', *Film Readers* no. 5 (1982), pp. 83–4.

Female transgression in US prime-time melodrama: the case of *Dynasty*

Moving on to a comparative look at the 1980s ultimate female opponent to patriarchal figures and the female transgressor par excellence on US prime-time television *Dynasty*'s Alexis Carrington-Colby. It is interesting to note that her character was not part of the show's original conception. Few critics and viewers may remember that *Dynasty* started out as a *Dallas* clone, distinguished from its model by the creator-producers' explicit attempt to make the Ewings look rather pedestrian and petit-bourgeois. What characterized both serials as a new type of melodrama on US prime-time television was their representation of corporate capitalism as outrageously immoral and patriarchy as excessively monstrous. *Dynasty*'s first season not only confronted viewers with numerous business manipulations executed by Blake Carrington, but also revealed that he hired a bunch of mobsters to beat up one of his

daughter's sexual playmates, that he raped his loving wife and killed his son's ex-lover. However, John Forsythe's performance as monstrous capitalist patriarch must have been judged as either too unconvincing or too boring to stick to the initial idea of presenting Blake Carrington as a challenge to J. R. Ewing. The Blake character was, therefore, slowly turned around to eventually become a 'good' patriarch and an honest businessman. However, this change did not improve the representation of the Carrington clan as a highly problematic family. This problem-ridden, if not dystopian familial figure characterizes all US prime-time melodramas in the generic vein of *Dallas*.

Since John Forsythe, alias Blake Carrington, proved himself a rather unpromising alternative to his popular *Dallas* competitor, the show's creators introduced his ex-wife into the first episode of *Dynasty*'s second season. The Alexis character links *Dynasty* to a particular line of Hollywood melodrama, to those films in which a female character is granted narrative functions usually reserved for a male protagonist.²¹ As feminist critics have pointed out, the presence of a female character in the function of narrative subject – rather than that of narrative object – tends to cause a considerable amount of ambiguity and contradiction within a popular text. Even though Alexis's overall significance is by no means identical to that of a protagonist in a narratively self-contained text, her function resembles that of a male protagonist in that she can be seen as the ultimate driving force behind the narrative. From her first appearance onwards, Alexis constantly disrupts the kind of corporate patriarchy represented by Blake Carrington. Her combined private and public 'war' against the familial patriarchy constitutes the serial's main source of conflict and provides a structural framework within which all other conflicts are inscribed.

With regard to the meanings of the Alexis character that can be produced from a female (textual) position, two coexisting patterns emerge from the text. The first one follows the model provided by Tania Modleski's analysis of the daytime soap opera villainess.²² According to such a reading, Alexis is a safety valve, providing an outlet for repressed female anger and frustration, while simultaneously confirming the cultural construction of female identity as egoless, passive and powerless. As we have argued elsewhere, the textual position from which such a reading of the villainess is produced implies a distinct social position, namely that of a white middle-class housewife. A second reading turns Alexis into a kind of heroine, into a female character posing a constant threat to the patriarchal order upheld by Blake Carrington. This pattern can be demonstrated by looking at the conflict in *Dynasty* between Alexis and Krystle Carrington, Blake's second wife, a conventional opposition between a melodramatic heroine and her adversary, the villainess or vamp. The Alexis–Krystle dichotomy

²¹ Here we refer to those films that Laura Mulvey has called female melodrama – see her 'Notes on Sirk and melodrama', *Movie*, no. 25 (1977/8).

²² Alexis is also characterized by a number of differences from the soap opera villainess – but they do not affect the applicability of the Modleski model – see our section 'Resisting the place of 'Ideal Mother'' in our article with Eva-Mana Warth and Hans Borchers 'Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naive: towards an ethnography of soap opera viewers', in Seiter et al. (eds), *Remote Control*.

signifies a conflict between a socially accepted femininity and its transgression. Characteristic of *Dynasty*'s representation of such a conflict is its inscription by a sequence of extremely conventional oppositional traits:

Krystle	Alexis
good	bad
American	European
middle-class	aristocrat
blonde	dark-haired
non-smoker	smoker
altruistic	egoistic
dependent	autonomous
wife	businesswoman
unthreatening	threatening sexuality
maternal sexuality	cut off from reproductive functions
monogamous	serial monogamy, with leanings towards polygamy
passive	active, vigorous, aggressive
suffering	enjoying
rejects power	indulges in execution of power
democratic	authoritarian
material possessions submitted to ideals and values	indulges in material possessions and wealth
idealist	hedonist

As Umberto Eco once noted, a single cliché may represent an annoyance, but a hundred clichés make for a true feast. With the Alexis character, *Dynasty* does not celebrate a respectable party, but indulges in an excessive orgy.

What particularly marks Alexis as a transgressor of accepted femininity is that she is represented as having appropriated traits which are conventionally coded as 'male'; for instance being active, autonomous and powerful. Thus, her character provides a female fantasy which turns the current state of gender relations upside-down. Read in this way, Alexis would also function as a kind of safety-valve for female anger and frustration. However, by reading Alexis as a kind of heroine, female anger is not directed at a female character, but at the patriarchal context of the fictional world of *Denver*. Thus, this pattern represents a much more explicit aesthetic

acknowledgement of real conflicts and desires experienced by women under patriarchy than that of Alexis is as villainess.

Let us point to some textual evidence for this pattern by looking at the character in relation to the issue of power. In the fictional world of *Dynasty*, we watch Alexis's unscrupulous and successful attempts to appropriate and exercise power in both the public and the private spheres. Since the concept of power is so inextricably interwoven into the 'male' cultural sphere, the synthesis between a female character and the blatant execution of power is bound to be particularly effective. What reinforces this highly ambivalent synthesis is that Alexis is endowed with physical attractiveness. Like the melodramatic vamp, she is represented as a sexual threat to her male environment. Not only does she threaten Blake's marriage to Krystle, but the encounter with her sexuality ultimately costs Cecil Colby his life, and her young lover and later husband Dex Dexter is submitted to considerable suffering because of his sexual addiction to her. As a woman beyond the magical age of forty, Alexis chooses and gets the men she wants. Thus, her character combines a variety of traits by which male culture has marked women as other. She is presented, in the fictional world of *Dynasty*, as the male fantasy of woman coming true and saying: 'Here is your worst nightmare'.

By piling up melodramatic conventions layer by layer, the representation of Alexis produces a televised version of the textual excess that critics have found in Hollywood film melodrama. This excess turns the viewer's attention to the representations' very fictionality and, thus, enables her to read the character – with tongue in cheek – as a (not so serious) threat to patriarchy. It should be noted, however, that this representation is not without its problems. We are not given a challenge to the conventional construction of woman as other, but its reinforcement. Alexis by no means represents a grown-up, autonomous and socially responsible woman, but a narcissistic personality, out for pleasure and power just to confirm her own grandiosity. What *Dynasty* presents to us is a distorted image of an active, and powerful female character, but one excessively marked as a fictitious narcissist. Since the Alexis character so vehemently rejects the traditional construction of femininity as egoless, passive and powerless, her character allows for more pleasures than critics have been ready to realize.

Conclusion

Die Schwarzwaldklinik maintains a much more masculinist and authoritarian ethos than serials such as *Dynasty*. Professor Brinkmann follows the tradition of the German doctor films of the 1950s with a few nuances, as Hoeppel has carefully explained 'Professor Brinkmann is a "heroic-fighting leader", not a strict patriarchal Godfather and not a Christlike magical healer. He embodies the more gentle, all-forgiving God, who works in the background and only appears when it is absolutely necessary, because the little ones need help.'²³

Hoeppel has noted the long-lived popularity of the doctor in film and television shows in Germany. It might be argued that all of this is inherent in the medical series form. It is, in this context, interesting to note that medical shows in the US such as *Dr. Kildare* (NBC/MGM/Arena, 1961–6), *Ben Casey* (ABC/Bing Crosby Productions, 1960–5) and *Marcus Welby, MD* (ABC/Universal, 1968–77), so popular in the 1950s and 1960s, were also based on a charismatic, authoritarian figure like Professor Brinkmann. Recent attempts to resurrect the medical series have failed: Richard Chamberlain was brought back in *Island Son* (Lorimar/NBC, 1989–90), as a sexier, more tropical doctor, a blend of *Shogun* and *Dr. Kildare*, but the show was cancelled after one season. *Heartbeat* (Spelling/ABC, 1988), about a team of women doctors, was a similar failure. The only success has been *Doogie Howser, MD* (Bohco Productions/Twentieth Century Fox, 1989–), a Stephen Bochco creation in which the good doctor is a thirteen-year-old boy genius.²⁴ Thus, the patriarchal overtones are masked by the hero's youth, although Doogie shares the unfailing wisdom of his predecessors. Professor Brinkmann's immense popularity with German fans signals the desire for such a figure of authority. Herta Herzog has noted that Germans seem to be regularly in love with such authoritarian heroes.²⁵ It is important that this is recognized not as an innate personality trait of Germans, but as a 'structure of feeling' continually reproduced in popular culture.

What we find in *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* as a hybridization of popular German genres, the *Heimatfilm* and the *Arztfilm*, are many distinctly German features, and they are troubling features: the love of invincible authority; the isolation of women; the old kinds of nationalism tied to class and gender hierarchies, and historically to fascism. The narrative structure has extensively borrowed from US prime-time serials, but declined the outrageous reversals of fortune and plot which so marked *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. Uniquely, *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* gives us the conservatism of *Heimat* in the form of the

²³ Hoeppel, Halbgötter in Weiß, p. 58.

²⁴ Joseph Turow, *Playing Doctor: Television, Storytelling and Medical Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁵ Herta Herzog, *Dallas and the German viewer and a comparison with Denver Clan*, unpublished manuscript (1984).

reductive version of the world found in tourist promotions. At the core, what has remained are the patriarchal elements that characterize most of the German mass media – and a very different deal for women onscreen and in the audience.

All melodramatic television serials are not created equal, and it is the historical evolution of combinations of genre forms which provide a basis for making crosscultural comparisons and for understanding the rigidity of popular traditions. While Hollywood is greedily eyeing the European Community as a market for its television programming and advertising, it is worth saying that all 'homegrown' television is not equally desirable, at least not from the point of view of women. One of the pitfalls of crosscultural television criticism may be that the text seems more singular in its meaning, and the critic is less familiar with the variety of actual readings that are produced by real audiences. Experiences and discussions about *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* with German female friends suggest that women may produce 'fragmented readings' or consider the show as purely kitsch in a way that resembles the camp readings of *Dynasty* discussed by Jane Feuer.²⁶ One of the main factors in producing a kitsch reading – especially for younger, university educated audiences – may be the show's ultra-Germanness, its reduction of culture to a series of vignettes. But our critical analysis as well as our experiences convince us that there are rigid limits to the variety of readings *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* can produce. Unlike *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, in which J. R. Ewing's and Blake Carrington's worlds are often turned upside-down, by forces (often women) quite outside their control, *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* offers a world intact. The Father still reigns here, relatively unchallenged. Professor Klaus Brinkmann is king of his mountain. *Die Schwarzwaldklinik* suggests that even when German public television sets out to be popular, to make serial melodrama, it cannot or will not produce a text as open to feminist readings as commercial US television, targeted at women consumers. The politics of international television criticism for feminists is bound in consequence to be endlessly contradictory and ambiguous.

²⁶ Jane Feuer 'Reading *Dynasty*: television and reception theory' *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 88, no. 2 (1989) pp. 443–60.

We would like to thank Susanne Bohmer for her support in watching the *Schwarzwaldklinik* episodes and Eva Maria Warth for her criticism of our discussion of *Der verlorene Sohn*.

'Spread like a monster blanket over the country': CBS and television, 1929–33

WILLIAM BODDY

Exploring the depression-era television activities of a US radio network may seem an unlikely historical project on two grounds: that a history of American television before its regulatory approval in 1941 or its commercial take-off point in 1947 is a tale of a non-event, at least as far as US consumers were concerned; and, moreover, that the various mechanical-scanning systems at issue in the early 1930s were technological deadends whose limitations were already recognized by many in the field. Why explore technological blind alleys and commercial false starts? Furthermore, the subject's marginality seems compounded by a focus on the Columbia Broadcasting System, a young and much junior rival to the National Broadcasting Company in network radio, and a company which would play a relatively small role in the research and manufacturing sectors of the television industry. Conventional histories of US television view the substantial record of writing about the activity in television of the 1930s from the prospective of a reverse teleology from the technologies and institutional arrangements which marked the industry's full-blown commercial status. In such accounts, the history of television before 1940 is often reduced to a history of technology, starring the Radio Corporation of America's Vladimir Zworykin with walk-ons by Philo Farnsworth of Allan B. DuMont.

But such a teleological reading of TV's distant past neglects the richness of the record of the late 1920s and early 1930s, which saw not only technical experimentation (of both blind alleys and

profitable future avenues), but also witnessed complex restructurings among American motion picture, broadcasting and electrical manufacturing industries, and saw the beginnings of an aesthetic discourse on the television medium. In place of the technological teleology and the biological essentialism with which early television is often discussed (a progress of scientific conception, laboratory gestation, and commercial birth, growth and maturity), I would like to briefly reenter the thicket of early television activity in the US to begin to unpack some of the larger determinations acting upon the medium. Television's commercial growth after World War Two was so rapid, and television's debt to the programme forms and the commercial and regulatory structures of radio broadcasting so clear and pervasive, that one has the inescapable sense that the largest issues concerning the commercial application of television technology were in fact worked out before television's postwar era. Certainly television in the 1940s never underwent the period of improvisation and uncertainty that the radio industry did in the 1920s in the US. Therefore, an examination of the manner in which one major actor in the early network radio industry – CBS – looked upon the prospect of television may underscore this larger, if often implicit, story of continuity and change.

Headed by the young cigar-company millionaire, William Paley, CBS saw television not from the perspective of a major electronics patent holder and manufacturer like RCA (owner of NBC), but from the perspective of a young broadcast network operator and entertainment company. CBS's record as an experimental television broadcaster from 1931–3 provides not only a rehearsal of many of TV's subsequent programme forms (comedy, musical programmes, sports, drama and so on), but CBS's television activities at the time provide glimpses of how differently television was used by its tiny early audiences from the place television eventually found in the American home.

William Paley used the metaphor of the 'monster blanket' not to describe television in 1929 as he announced the swap of fifty per cent of CBS stock with Paramount Pictures, but rather to describe the chain of motion-picture theatres owned by Paramount. Paley envisioned a 'master combination' of the two companies and of the industries of radio and motion pictures brought about with the founding of the new medium of television. Paley's 'monster blanket', certainly an apt metaphor for the eventual structure of the network television industry decades later, was inspired not only by the geographical breadth of Paramount's theatres, but also by the major studios' vertical integration as producers, distributors and exhibitors of feature films. Vertical integration provided the model for the subsequent network television industry and in particular for the deliberate moves by Paley after World War Two to wrest talent, programme and schedule control from broadcast sponsors in the new

medium. Paley's tie-up with Paramount was mirrored by RCA's 1929 launch of its motion-picture subsidiary Radio-Keith-Orpheum. Such depression-era links between the Hollywood studios and broadcast networks anticipate fifty years of uneasy manoeuvring between the two sectors in the US television industry, continuing through the present and prospective wave of studio and network acquisitions and consolidations.

Another possible inspiration for Paley's figurative monster blanket was CBS's successful 1930 takeover of a major talent agency, which by the mid-1930s would be responsible for half the bookings for major musical artists in the country. Inspired by the success of both the Music Corporation of America and NBC's own talent agency, CBS exploited this other model of business integration, where the functions of agent and employer were consolidated for network benefit, and which is also suggestive of several subsequent network practices in the television industry

The precise role of television in Paramount's interest in CBS in 1929 is unclear. Zukor had approached the network's previous owner in 1927, and the unusual financial circumstances in Hollywood at the end of the 1920s brought about by the transition to sound (and the rivalry between RCA and American Telephone & Telegraph over sound-film patents and equipment sales) plus the expansion of theatre holdings by the studios complicate the picture. Paramount was silent on the background of the CBS deal except to note the appeal of network radio to boost motion-picture stars and theatre attendance. William Paley, however, was voluble on the stock swap, telling one group that the deal 'heralds an amalgamation of such far-reaching consequence as the linking up of a great radio network and the master organization in motion picture producing and exhibiting . . .'. The phrase 'we have made history' applied, Paley argued.¹ He elaborated

Spread like a monster blanket over the country is a great assemblage of motion picture houses, exhibiting Paramount productions and those distributed by them. Over the same area a penetrating network of powerful radio stations has been engaging the attention of that same public and catering to its amusement needs in the home. There were great possibilities inherent if not actual that these two dominating forces in entertainment might find themselves in competition, if not in conflict. But now they have welded together in a master combination of direction, facilities, talent and resources and to the ultimate end that the public is to be better served and new peaks scaled in the arts of entertainment

It is more than an axiom that the public has to be amused, entertained. It is an economic necessity, what the motion picture has done for the worker wearied with a day of toil has been dealt

¹ William S. Paley address, St Louis, January 1929 (Collection of the CBS Reference Library, New York). For a discussion of the CBS-Paramount swap see Jonathan Buchsbaum, 'Zukor buys protection: the Paramount stock purchase of 1929', *Cine-Tracts*, vol. 2, nos 3-4 (1979), pp. 49-62; and Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), pp. 39-41, 50-54.

with in pulpit and press and debated for years by statesmen and sages.²

² Paley address St Louis, January 1929, p 2

After calling radio a 'lusty infant' in the speech, Paley corrected himself: 'Broadcasting is no infant; it is a giant. It makes people do things.' Suggesting that television's role was still unsettled, Paley remarked:

One thing is certain, however. It is coming; whether it be in two years or five, it is sure to come. And with this amalgamation of interests we are prepared. Columbia can lean on Paramount for the new problems entailing actual stage presentations in full costume to be broadcast, and Paramount knows it has an outlet in presenting its television features to the public.³

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5

Paley argued that the eventual application of television was unclear, it might find a place in the home along the model of network radio, or a role in future motion-picture theatres, enhanced by supersized screens, full colour and 3D. 'The home can hardly be expected to be transformed into a modern theater having all the perfected devices and appurtenances available to the theater,' he said in 1930.⁴ Paley argued that television would not threaten the theatrical motion picture, and offered various rationales: that man was by nature a social creature ('he likes to rub elbows with his fellow men'); that science, like nature, always strikes a balance; and that 'moreover, someone will have to foot the bill for home television, and it is hard to conceive of an advertising sponsorship of the filmed efforts of Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks'.⁵

⁴ William S. Paley, 'Radio and entertainment', in Martin Codel (ed.), *Radio and Its Future* (New York: Harpers, 1930), p. 66

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 63, 65–67

Richard W. Hubbell's *4000 Years of Television* in 1942 described the euphoria surrounding the medium *circa*, 1931:

The word 'television' became DYNAMIC!!! It took on the attributes of a Lost Atlantis, a Fountain of Youth, a modern Midas Touch, the THING-TO-GET-IN-ON-THE-GROUND-FLOOR-OF! It would be lighting up every home, competing with the movies. It would KILL the movies! . . . it held out the allure of a Brunnehilde a-slumbering in the flaming crucible of science. A lot of people wanted to play Siegfried and rouse the maiden who slept.⁶

⁶ Richard W. Hubbell, *4000 Years of Television* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), p. 97

CBS's prognosis for television in the years 1929–32 was mixed, but generally upbeat. Paley told the *New York Times* radio critic in 1932: 'I believe television will be in operation on a commercial basis by the end of 1932.'⁷ In his announcement of the 1929 Paramount deal, Paley concluded

⁷ Orrin E. Dunlap, *The Outlook for Television* (Revised Edition) (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), p. 193

Our imagination can run wild, I know. I only want to point out, that whatever comes, be it television or any form of new entertainment which in any way has to do with screen presentation, stage presentation or radio presentation, that our

amalgamation of interests finds us wholly prepared to take advantage of it. And that should be a comfortable feeling of satisfaction.⁸

8 Paley address St Louis, January 1929 p 3

With its significant interests in electronics manufacturing, CBS's senior network rival NBC/RCA also pursued television into the potential programme production centres of Hollywood. NBC/RCA maintained a typically imperial tone describing its ambitions in the new medium: as early as 1928, when applying for a commercial television licence, RCA told the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) that 'only an experienced and responsible organization, such as the Radio Corporation of America, can be depended upon to uphold high standards of service.'⁹ A series of NBC memoranda outlines its approaches to early television and its relation to the film industry; NBC executive John F. Royal wrote in 1931: 'The first television broadcast will, no doubt, be done by film. This will open up a very big question. Are we to make the film productions, or are they to be made for us? Can agencies have their own films made and submit them to us, the same as they do outside productions at present?'¹⁰ Another NBC executive concluded in 1931: 'Obviously, the course to be followed is the creation of a film television department jointly directed by RKO and ourselves. The function of this department would be to create, obtain and supervise all film material to be used for television purposes.'¹¹ A memorandum from RCA's chief engineer in 1935 cited an earlier 'strong feeling' within the corporation that not only should NBC establish its own film production arm, but that it develop proprietary transcription standards to provide a 'handicap to the motion picture producers in entering the field'.¹² Another 1935 NBC memorandum sketched out the company's grand ambitions in television broadcasting:

The ideal, of course, is that NBC should absolutely control its own network of stations. There may be, however, some opposition to this in these socialistic times. Obviously, a network of independent owners including perhaps many newspapers, is stronger, in a political sense, than a chain of stations owned by one organization. My own feeling is that a compromise can be reached through friendly interests, so that the National Broadcasting Company will be protected in its key cities and will be assured of cooperation in the other cities.¹³

The issues of industry structure in network television and the role of motion-picture studios in television programming were perennial in the popular and trade literature since the 1920s.

In December 1930, the Federal Radio Commission approved CBS's application for an experimental television station. William Paley announced to the press: 'Through the Concerts Corporation and the Paramount-Publix Corporation, the Columbia network now

9 Quoted in Robert H. Stern *The FCC and Television: The Regulatory Process in an Environment of Rapid Technological Innovation* (PhD dissertation, Harvard University 1950, New York: Arno Press 1979) p. 56.

10 NBC Memorandum from John F. Royal to G. F. McClelland, 29 August 1931 (Collection of the NBC Records Administration Library, New York).

11 NBC Memorandum from H. B. Schaad to George Engles, 12 August 1931 (Collection of the NBC Records Administration Library, New York).

12 Letter from O. B. Hanson to W. R. G. Baker, 24 July 1935 (Collection of the NBC Records Administration Library, New York).

13 NBC Memorandum from C. W. Horn to R. C. Paterson, 10 May 1935 (Collection of the NBC Records Administration Library, New York), p. 4.

14 William S. Paley. Columbia's television plans, press release, 16 December 1930 (Collection of the CBS Reference Library, New York) p. 1

15 William S. Paley. Annual report, 16 January 1931 p. 4

16 'Onward ever onward' *Sponsor* 13 September 1965 p. 54

17 'And all because they're so smart' *Fortune*, June 1935, pp. 154-158

18 Columbia Broadcasting System, 'Television inaugural broadcast' transcript, 21 July 1931 (Collection of the CBS Reference Library, New York) pp. 2-9

19 'Complete television log' *New York Sun*, 10 September 1932, p. 11, 'Grid games in miniature', *New York Sun*, 10 October 1931

20 Joseph H. Udelson. *The Great Television Race: A History of the American Television Industry 1925-41* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press 1982), p. 59

has direct contact with famous concert performers, opera stars, and motion picture artists. I know they are all vitally interested in the progress of television.'¹⁴ Like the 'monster blanket' of the vertically-integrated motion-picture studio, the talent agency provided a model for network structure. Following the paths of the Music Corporation of America and NBC, CBS acquired and consolidated several concert bureaux and talent agencies in 1930, offering the benefits of what Paley described as 'combined, efficient and non-competitive management'.¹⁵ Columbia Artists Bureau was making \$2.3 million before commissions in 1935 booking live talent,¹⁶ and the Columbia Concerts Corporation handled fifty per cent of the touring artists in the US; *Fortune* wrote in 1935 of the Columbia Artists Bureau: '... unless you have a big name or are brought in by a commercial advertiser it is difficult to get a job with CBS through any agency except the Columbia Bureau.'¹⁷

In June 1931, CBS initiated experimental television broadcasts, seven hours a day, seven days a week from studios in the network's headquarters on Madison Avenue. The opening programme included talks by Mayor Jimmy Walker and Dr Walter Schaffer, chief engineer of Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft of Germany; a comic-monologue version of Little Red Riding Hood; two singing duets; a song by Kate Smith, a piano performance by George Gershwin; and an appearance by CBS's 'Miss Television', Natellie Towers.¹⁸ Over the next eighteen months, CBS presented hundreds of vaudeville artists, singers, dancers, magicians, palm readers, sketch artists, animal acts, fashion shows and makeup demonstrations. Notre Dame football games were presented via a miniature gridiron and a tiny metal football moved by invisible wires. Boxing sparring contests were staged on Tuesday nights in a small ring before the camera specially mounted on a movable pivot.¹⁹ The *Television Ghost* began, a regular series of television dramas described by CBS as 'Murder Stories as told by the ghost of the murdered. Closeup projection with weird effects'.²⁰

The constraints of low sixty-line resolution, shallow depth of field, and a generally static camera demanded all the action be staged within an area of four square feet. Detailed instructions were offered for performers in a CBS memorandum, 'Hints for television broadcasters', written in 1931 by CBS's director of television operations, William Schudt:

ACTION is a very important factor in visual broadcasting. It has been found that an active image comes through more clearly than any others. Act as much as possible in your program. Use your hands, head, and shoulders – also, where songs indicate, roll your eyes, and shake your finger at the televisor.

While broadcasting you may move around in a TWO FOOT SQUARE SPACE without getting out of focus. Look into the

light to either side of it. DO NOT LOOK up at the microphone

If you move out of the picture, the production man will give you a slight tap or push in the right direction. When such corrections are made, try not to look around in an amazed manner. Lookers-in will be quick to notice the unpremeditated move.²¹

²¹ William S. Schudt, Jr. 'Hints for television broadcasters', memorandum 1931 (Collection of the CBS Reference Library, New York), p. 1

The anniversary broadcast of the CBS station in 1932 inaugurated simultaneous audio transmission on the same channel and offered viewers the chance to witness an orchestra conductor directing a remote ensemble via television.

While CBS boasted of a New York television audience in 1932 consisting of ten thousand 'lookers-in', a CBS executive noted that 'The bulk of our television fan mail comes from enthusiasts scattered throughout a thousand-mile radius of New York . . .'.²² The frequencies allocated by the FRC for experimental television broadcasting were in the short-wave portion of the spectrum, which meant that signals frequently travelled great distances. According to *Business Week* in 1931, television broadcasters admitted 'that interest in their efforts is confined almost entirely to the experimenter – the young man of mechanical bent whose principle interest is in how television works rather than in the quality of the images received'.²³ The *New York Times* shared some of CBS's television mail in 1932 from disparate points in North Carolina, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Vermont, Kansas and Michigan. One viewer in Montreal told CBS:

²² William A. Schudt, Jr., 'Believes television for home is here' *New York Sun*, 18 June 1932

²³ 'Television still has a long way to go', *Business Week*, 11 March 1931, p. 14

While experimenting with a television set last night we are quite sure that we intercepted some of your pictures from New York. We saw several pictures between 10.15 and 10.45 p.m. The first was a man and two others were women. They seemed to be different persons.²⁴

²⁴ Orrin E. Dunlap, 'Television's mail', *New York Times*, 7 August 1932

Another viewer of CBS's experimental New York station, this one from Michigan, told the network:

Last night I succeeded in bringing in the picture of a partially bald-headed man on my television machine. The image was quite clear, but I could not hold it long. There was some fading. The man moved his head quite often. The lips could be seen to move. I did not hear the sound. This is the only station I have succeeded in framing and I hope you can verify reception of this partially bald-headed person.²⁵

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Problems of recognizing television performers were not limited to distant lookers-in. CBS's director of television complained in 1931 that 'visitors at our studios who see our programs often make the mistake of comparing them with what they see on a movie screen'.²⁶ A reporter for the *Newark News* in 1931 was taken on a tour of

²⁶ Schudt, 'Believes television for home is here'

CBS's studio, including a close-circuit screening of the next-door studio's transmission on a four-inch screen; the reporter concluded that 'the performers are in no danger of being recognized after a television broadcast' She wrote that 'the whole effect is rather charming and the girls very pretty in a vague and fleeting way', but complained that 'the image is too illusory to be satisfying; you long to turn some dial to steady it and to bring it into sharper focus. Television is a promise but very little more.'²⁷ A sympathetic 1931 article in *Forbes* admitted that 'the sixty-line image leaves much detail to the imagination'.²⁸

²⁷ Charlotte Geer 'Columbia's television' *Newark News*, 10 October 1931

²⁸ Thomas Calvert McClary, 'Television – its probabilities and possibilities', *Forbes*, 1 August 1931, p. 20

Partisans of mechanical television appealed to faith in incremental and inevitable technical progress, and sought analogies to various other inventions at early stages – the automobile industry of 1904, the motion picture industry of 1908, the phonograph industry of 1910 and the radio industry of 1921. Others were unconvinced, such as the *New York Herald Tribune* which, in a 1931 article entitled 'Television needs an inventor', argued that

present-day television is almost hopelessly imperfect and . . . little fundamental progress has been made since the first processes reached some success a few years ago.

But if the history of other branches of invention is to be repeated by television what the world waits for now is an inventor with a new idea; something that will cut the knots of present difficulties not by the gradual loosening of detailed improvement, but by some totally new way of sending visual impulses over electric links.²⁹

²⁹ 'Television needs an inventor' *New York Herald Tribune*, 1931

After nearly two years and 2,500 hours of experimental programmes in television, CBS suspended the service on 23 February 1933. The network explained

We now feel that further operation with the present facilities offers little possibility of contribution to the art of television, and we have, accordingly, decided to suspend temporarily our program schedule . . . it is our intention to resume our experimental transmission as soon as we are sufficiently satisfied that advanced equipment of broader scope can be installed. Until then our activities will be confined to the laboratory and the maintenance of our close contacts with the other organizations in the field.³⁰

³⁰ Quoted in Columbia Broadcasting System 'Twentieth anniversary of CBS Television' press release 10 July 1951 (Collection of the CBS Reference Library, New York), p. 5

There were several factors behind Columbia's abandonment of early television. It was increasingly clear that mechanical television had indeed reached the limits of its technology and that high-definition (400 lines or more) electronic television would require such wide bandwidths that the entire service would have to be moved into the relatively unexplored higher frequencies which

would limit the service area of television broadcasters to line of sight transmission.

The financial contexts of broadcasting and the US economy were also changing. William Paley could tell his stockholders in January 1931

I dare say this is one of the few boards of Directors that can gather around a mahogany table these days to hear good news. I believe you all know in a general way that the broadcasting business has not suffered so severely as most others from the world-wide business slump, and I am happy to be able to tell you that the Columbia Broadcasting System has had at least a little more than its share of this good fortune.³¹

³¹ William S. Paley, 'Annual report', 16 January 1931, p. 1

In 1929–30 CBS's gross sales were up fifty-nine per cent, and its affiliates grew from thirty-eight to seventy-six stations. The prosperity continued through the early years of the depression. Columbia's rapid growth allowed Paley to buy back the CBS stock which Paramount had purchased in 1929, since their agreement stipulated that Paramount buy back its stock if Columbia earned \$2 million in profits within two years. That mark was reached by CBS in September 1931.³²

³² William S. Paley, *As It Happened* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), p. 84

While the repurchase left Paley with forty per cent of the CBS stock and a check for \$2 million from Paramount, it also brought a reorganization of the CBS board. Three representatives of the Wall Street investment bankers which had financed CBS's stock repurchase were added to the Columbia board, including Prescott Bush, George Bush's father.³³

³³ Frank C. Waldrop and Joseph Borkin, *Television – A Struggle for Power* (New York: William Morrow, 1938), p. 222

³⁴ William S. Paley, '1933 Annual report', 2 March 1934

By 1933, however, network revenues were down, finally reaching 'the last industry to be overtaken by the depression', according to Paley.³⁴ The dim outlook for imminent regulatory approval of commercial television, the shortage of consumer or industrial capital to devote to the new medium, and the strategy of RCA at the time to move slowly in television, all contributed to a cooling of enthusiasm for television at CBS. Moreover, after the 1933 downturn, Columbia's radio revenues picked up again in 1934; by 1935 *Fortune* could write that 'to say that CBS has made money is to damn with faint praise'.³⁵ Between 1933 and 1937 television virtually disappeared in CBS's public announcements as the company became more concerned with enlarging its AM radio business and fighting back threatening regulatory reform. As the 1930s went on, CBS increasingly took on a sceptical, even hostile attitude toward new broadcast services like FM radio and television. William Paley's remarks before the Federal Communications Commission in 1936 were typical: 'Sudden, revolutionary twists and turns in our planning for the future must be avoided. Capital can adjust itself to orderly progress, it always does. But it retreats in the

³⁵ 'And all because they're so smart', *Fortune*, June 1935, p. 81

³⁶ William S. Paley 'Statement before an informal engineering hearing of the Federal Communications Commission', 16 June 1936 (Collection of the CBS Reference Library, New York), pp. 2–4.

³⁷ Laurence Bergreen *Look Now, Pay Later: The Rise of Network Broadcasting* (New York: New American Library, 1980) p. 147.

³⁸ William A. Nugent, 'Columbia Broadcasting's position: earnings growth shown during depression now slowing down', *Barrons*, 29 September 1941, p. 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 'Thumbnail stock appraisal: six stocks with good peace prospects', *Magazine of Wall Street*, 26 December 1942, p. 289.

⁴⁰ For discussion of CBS's plans for a Latin American radio network, see 'Plans Latin American network', *Printer's Ink*, 27 December 1940, p. 66; William S. Paley, 'Radio turns south', *Fortune*, April 1941, pp. 77–9; 'CBS Latin network', *Business Week*, 6 June 1942, p. 46; and E. Roderick Dehl, 'South of the border: the NBC and CBS radio networks and the Latin American venture 1930–1942', *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 4 (1977), pp. 2–12.

⁴¹ Peter C. Goldmark *Maverick Inventor: My Turbulent Years at CBS* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1973), p. 46.

⁴² William S. Paley 'Statement before an informal engineering hearing of the Federal Communications Commission', 16 June 1936 (Collection of the CBS Reference Library, New York), pp. 2–4.

⁴³ 'CBS moves in on television: plans transmitter on Chrysler Building', *Business Week*, 10 April 1937, p. 20–1.

face of chaos' Paley pointed to 'the need to go slow in adding to or revising the present commercial broadcast structure'.³⁶

By the end of the 1930s CBS was a strong second to NBC in radio programme ratings and revenues; a Federal Communications Commission report in 1938 estimated the return on tangible investment at eighty per cent at NBC and seventy-one per cent at CBS.³⁷ The growing revenues of both CBS and NBC in the 1930s were built on rising radio set penetration and the expansion of affiliate transmission facilities; network prime-time programming was generally produced or licensed by radio sponsors which controlled a specific 'time franchise' on a network schedule. By 1941, CBS was reaching ninety-six per cent of the nation's radio homes via 125 affiliates, having increased its number of affiliates twenty per cent between 1935 and 1939; and, as *Barrons* reported, 'no further expansion of revenues can be expected from the extension of facilities'.³⁸ At the same time, CBS in the early 1940s was in a very favourable financial position; in 1941 it had \$7.5 million in cash in hand and an assets-to-liabilities ratio of over 2:1; in 1942 cash in hand totalled \$12.5 million and the company's assets-to-liabilities ratio stood at 2.66:1.³⁹ Other investment opportunities were not far from hand for the cash-rich radio network.

By 1940 CBS was looking to new fields of investment for its enormous revenues from AM broadcasting. Beyond television, these included the acquisition of Columbia Records Incorporated in 1939; plans for an eighteen-nation Latin American commercial network announced in 1940; and the company's acquisition of radio talent after World War Two.⁴⁰ At the same time, with ninety per cent of its revenues generated by the sale of AM advertising time, CBS faced with some anxiety the prospect of technological upheaval in the form of FM radio and television in the 1940s. Its chief broadcast rival, NBC, was a subsidiary of the electronics giant RCA, and RCA's potential patent and manufacturing profits from commercial television were inextricably linked to NBC's plans for television. Despite CBS's five-person research staff under engineer Peter C. Goldmark begun in 1935, CBS's interest in television in the 1930s was primarily defensive, reacting to RCA's moves concerning the medium.⁴¹ William Paley told a 1936 FCC hearing on possible allocations for FM radio and television 'We should do nothing to weaken the structure of aural broadcasting in the present band until experimentation in other bands has yielded us new certainties'.⁴² In 1937 *Business Week* noted CBS's announcement of plans to build an experimental television transmitter at the top of the Chrysler Building in New York City, but added that no alliance of RCA rivals could challenge that company's patent position in television manufacturing.⁴³

Despite CBS announcements in 1937 of the Chrysler Building transmitter, the creation of studios in Grand Central Station and the

⁴⁴ Columbia Broadcasting System, 'Gilbert Seldes is selected to direct CBS experimental television programs' press release 20 August 1937 (Collection of the CBS Reference Library New York)

⁴⁵ William Boddy 'Building the world's largest advertising medium CBS and television, 1940-60' in Tino Balio (ed.) *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), pp. 63-89

appointment of the prominent critic Gilbert Seldes as its director of television, CBS leaders were cautious in their forecasts for commercial television.⁴⁴ An even more controversial period of CBS involvement in television was launched in 1941 when CBS unveiled the first of a long series of colour television schemes. That era was not to end until 1953 when the Federal Communications Commission, reversing an earlier decision, voted to kill the last of the CBS colour television proposals in favour of the RCA standards which prevail today in US television. But before that battle had ended, CBS had wrested programme supremacy from NBC to initiate a twenty-four year reign as the number-one US network and had become the world's largest single advertising medium. But that is another story.⁴⁵

I am grateful to Laura Kapnick at the CBS Reference Library and to Cathy Lim and Marilyn Dean at the NBC Records Administration office for their assistance in preparing this article

Heard over the phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde tradition of the terrors of technology

TOM GUNNING

There is something spooklike in the title of this Biograph subject, but we hasten to say that the incidents are of a decidedly material nature

Publicity bulletin for *The Lonely Villa*¹

Maintaining and joining, the telephone line holds together what it separates. . . . Being on the telephone will come to mean, therefore, that contact is never constant nor is the break clean.

Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book*²

. . . it's a most astonishing thing, but if I were to telephone twenty times a day, I should never get the hang of the blessed thing, it seems weird and uncanny

André Marex in André de Lorde's play *Au téléphone*³

Near the opening of *Civilization and its Discontents* Sigmund Freud examines the contention that it is civilization itself, and specifically modern civilization, that might be responsible for man's discontent Taking a sceptical view of the claim that man was happier in simpler times, Freud asks:

. . . is there then no positive gain in pleasure, no unequivocal increase in my feeling of happiness, if I can, as often as I please, hear the voice of a child of mine who is living hundreds of miles away or if I can learn in the shortest possible time after a friend

¹ *The Lonely Villa* (Griffith, 1908 reprinted in Eileen Bowser (ed.), *The Biograph Bulletins, 1908-1912* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1973), p. 97

² Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 4, 20

³ André de Lorde and Charles Foley, *Au téléphone* (an English translation *At the Telephone*, appears in Thomas Edwards (ed.), *One Act Plays for Stage and Study* (New York: Samuel French, 1925, second series)

has reached his destination that he has come through the long and difficult journey unharmed?

However, after listing some other clear benefits modern technology has bestowed on mankind, Freud gives the floor to 'the voice of pessimistic criticism' and adds:

If there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice, if travelling across the ocean by ship had not been introduced, my friend would not have embarked on his sea-voyage and I should not need a cable to relieve my anxiety about him ⁴

If the years around the turn of the century inaugurate (as Stephen Kern has indicated⁵) a new culture of time and space, we should not be surprised that Freud was particularly aware of the ambivalence of this new chronotope. On the one hand, distance (and the duration needed to cover it) is abolished. On the other hand, this technological conquering of space and time can be illusory. Families and friends are dispersed by the new technology as much as they are brought together, and the apparent compression of time can, in fact, cause a precipitate collapse of the processes of reflection. Kern theorizes, for instance, that instantaneous communication through cable and telephone artificially speeded up the July crisis that led to World War One, as technological haste propelled ultimatums and responses into a scenario of unstoppable confrontation ⁶ When Freud compared the telephone's ability to overcome distance to the magical powers of a fairy tale⁷ he was well aware of the dire consequences such magical gifts often entail.

Now at the close of another century, with new technological topologies confronting us, I believe we look back at the first experiences of technology with an uncanny sense of *déjà vu*. Not only do we confront the same ambivalence of optimism and anxiety, but the scenarios constructed around these primal ambiguities seem even more clearly legible. In the recent historicizing of film study, placing film within a history of the reception of technology has emerged as a primary challenge. Deriving inspiration particularly from Walter Benjamin's curtailed arcades project (and from such heirs to the Benjamin tradition as Wolfgang Schivelbusch⁸), the new exploration of the history of technology is more than technical. If Benjamin's method is fully understood, technology can reveal the dream world of society as much as its pragmatic rationalization.⁹

Although Freud does not really emphasize the dichotomy, I think that the opposition he sets up between technologies is revealing, particularly for early cinema. On the one hand he invokes those powerful devices of transportation and separation, the steamship and the railway. On the other hand, and apparently healing the breach, stand the machineries of communication and binding, the telephone

4 Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its discontents' in James Strachey (ed. and trans.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol XXI (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), p. 88. Ronell uses this quote in *The Telephone Book*, pp. 86–94. I signal here the inspiration and uncanny amusement Ronell's book provided for me, in spite of a wide divergence in method and thank Mary Ann Doane for alerting me to it.

5 Stephen Kern *The Culture of Time and Space (1880–1918)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

6 Ibid. 259–86.

7 Freud *Civilization and its discontents* p. 91.

8 Benjamin's arcades project has been brilliantly presented and discussed in Susan Buck-Morss *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). Wolfgang Schivelbusch's translated works on the history of technology are *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Unizin Books, 1979 – now available from University of California Press) and *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

9 On the concept of the dream world of mass culture see Buck-Morss *The Dialectics of Seeing* particularly pp. 253–86.

and telegraph. As Schivelbusch has shown, the railway was the nineteenth century's mythic image of the new technology, embodying an excessive power that inspired terror as well as awe. Schivelbusch reveals that the railway's beneficial overcoming of space and time was balanced by the spectre of the railway accident, a figure as terrifying in fantasy as it was overwhelming in reality. The catastrophic effect of a train wreck on victims not injured physically led to the first medical diagnosis of traumatic neurosis and the acknowledgement that psychic events could have physical effects, paving the way for the theory of hysteria as formulated by Freud and Breuer at the end of the century.¹⁰

Lynne Kirby in her work on the image of the railway has proposed hysteria as a model for the spectator's experience of early cinema.¹¹ Thinking along the same lines, I have tried to theorize the particular effect of the non-narrativized cinema of attractions as an aesthetic of astonishment, exploiting a turn of the century taste for entertainment which confronted its spectator with a series of shocks.¹² The enduring film genre of early actualities of locomotives seemingly bearing down on camera and spectator exemplifies the audience address of a cinema which favoured direct visual stimulus over narrative development. But what about the role of technology in the period of narrativization which prepared the way for the classical paradigm? A film like D. W. Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) shows how the new technology's ability to 'annihilate space and time' could support and interrelate with new narrative devices such as suspenseful parallel editing. The pattern of alteration brilliantly analysed in this film by Raymond Bellour¹³ not only establishes gender positions (from Blanche Sweet, the threatened telegraph operator, to Frank Grandin, her engineer boyfriend) but also articulates the mode of technology each commands: the railway and telegraphy. The technology seems to follow Freud's typology. The railway separates the young lovers at the beginning while Blanche's morse code call for help reunites them. However the telegraph only *communicates* her plight to her lover and it is the speeding locomotive that brings them back together.

As Noel Burch and others (including myself) have pointed out, as cinema moved toward classical storytelling it had to overcome the self-contained and self-sufficient aspect of autonomous attractions addressed directly to a spectator.¹⁴ Narrative development demanded the creation of a larger fictional whole assembled from a succession of shots. The individual shot was subordinated to an extended action in the new multi-shot narratives, with the direct address to the spectator sublated into a vectorized narrative expectation which carried the spectator from shot to shot. This was largely accomplished through a genre whose fictional action clearly required a succession of shots, the chase films so popular from 1903 to 1908

10 Schivelbusch *The Railway Journey* pp 131-45

11 Lynne Kirby, 'Male hysteria and early cinema' *Camera Obscura* no 17 (1988), pp 113-31

12 Tom Gunning, 'An aesthetic of astonishment: early film and the (in)credulous spectator', *Art & Text* no 34 (1989), pp 31-45

13 Raymond Bellour 'Alterner/raconter' in R. Bellour (ed.) *Le cinéma Américain* (Paris: Flammarion 1980) pp 69-88

14 See Noel Burch 'Passion, poursuite, la linéarisation in *Communications*, no 38 (1983), pp 30-50 and Tom Gunning 'Non-continuity, continuity, discontinuity: a theory of genres in early films', *IRIS* vol 2, no 1 (1984), pp 101-12

These films traced a clear line of diegetic action, creating a fully legible course for the spectator to negotiate as action moved from locale to locale and from shot to shot.

But with the appearance of parallel editing and the narrative devices of alternation it supplies, such simple tracing of physical action no longer suffices. Appearing as it does during the period of film's intense narrativization, in which character psychology begins to motivate narrative action and the spatial and temporal relations between actions are no longer restricted to the clear linearity of the chase format, parallel editing typifies, without exhausting, the systematic nature that cinematic narration begins to display around 1908. It is the workings of this narrative system and its hardly accidental interrelation to technology that I wish to explore here. In the films I will discuss in this article the newly emerging forms of filmic narration display a relation (simultaneously thematic and structural) to the way technology structures modern life.

In the increasingly narrativized cinema of the transitional period (roughly 1907–13) the discontinuous shocks of early cinema become increasingly absorbed into a complex narrative process. This systemic approach to narrative creates a number of new tasks for the spectator, as he/she negotiates a series of spatio-temporal relations between events and interprets characters' motives. Placed in an active (yet also narrowly circumscribed) role before what (following Walter Benjamin) we could describe as a conveyor belt of narrative information, the newly formed cinematic spectator bears a striking similarity to the modern participant in technological processes. Integral to a process not in his/her control, the spectator must make the connections demanded or risk narrative incoherence.

Temporal simultaneity demands a more abstract sense of the interrelation of space and time and in many instances early filmmakers incorporated recent technology into the plots of their films to naturalize film's power to move through space and time. The telephone supplies a particularly powerful example. In a key article Eileen Bowser demonstrates that portraying the unique spatial and temporal relations of a telephone conversation (different spaces but simultaneous time) called for ingenious solutions by early filmmakers, which were eventually coded and became common practice.¹⁵ True to the cinema of attractions' preference for the single shot, split-screens or split-sets predominate initially, with James Williamson's *Are You There?* (1901) using a none too stable curtain to separate the supposedly distant telephone lovers who are filmed within a single shot. Biograph's *The Story the Biograph Told* (1904) uses an actual superimposition of the two parties in a phone conversation (a solution I have not seen elsewhere), while Edwin Porter's *College Chums* (1907) creates an ingenious shot in which both participants appear in matted-in frames over a graphic image of a city, as animated letters pass between them conveying their

¹⁵ Eileen Bowser, 'Le coup de téléphone dans les primitifs du cinéma', in Pierre Guibert (ed.) *Les premiers ans du cinéma français* (Perpignan: Institut Jean Vigo, 1985) pp. 218–24. Most of this text has been incorporated into Bowser's *History of American Cinema Vol. II: The Emergence of Cinema* (New York: Scribners, 1990).

conversation. Such split-screen devices remain an alternative method of conveying phone conversations into the classical period, with Lois Weber's three way split-screen in *Suspense* (1913) providing the most elaborate example from the pre-feature era.

But after 1908 the most frequent device for portraying a phone conversation was parallel editing, cutting from one end of the telephone line to the other. While the earliest instances of extended parallel editing only occasionally portray telephone conversations, the fit between the spatio-temporal form of the event and that of its portrayal has a particularly satisfying effect which one suspects rendered the innovative technique particularly legible to film audiences. Griffith's first extended use of parallel editing appeared in *The Fatal Hour* shot in August 1908. In this suspenseful tale of white slavery, a murderous clock device supplied the technological mediation, precisely counting off the minutes and marking the time between shots. In February 1909 Griffith shot his first film containing a suspensefully intercut phone conversation, *The Medicine Bottle*, followed in April and May of that year by his most famous telephone film, *The Lonely Villa*, a film which has become the *locus classicus* of parallel editing.

It is the genealogy of this film that I want to explore. With its last minute rescue; invasion of the bourgeois home; strict alternation between gender positions (the hysterical women inside the house, the threatening/rescuing males breaking in or rushing to the rescue); and, most important for my purposes, the technological link via the telephone that propels the climax into action, *The Lonely Villa* has become recognized as an archetype of film melodrama. But if the film is often cited as an ur-form of later rescue melodramas, we need to realize that it actually retells an older story which had already undergone a number of transformations. Retracing these various versions, we uncover a grim fable of technology whose fascination for early filmmakers reveals some of the darker aspects of the dream world of instant communication and the annihilation of space and time.

A variety of film scholars have recently pointed to Pathé's *The Physician of the Castle* (1908) as the direct inspiration for Griffith's film.¹⁶ The film, released in the US in 1908 under the title *A Narrow Escape*,¹⁷ has practically the same plot as *The Lonely Villa*. A doctor leaves his house to treat a patient after receiving a false message sent by burglars seeking to rob his house in his absence. When he arrives at the home of the patient he receives a desperate telephone call from his wife who tells him of the burglars' invasion. The physician jumps into his car for a wild race home, picking up two gendarmes on the way. He arrives home just in the nick of time to arrest the burglars about to seize his wife. Anyone familiar with Griffith's film recognizes an almost exact duplication. There are only minor plot changes (for example, the husband in Griffith's film is

16 The late Jay Leyda directed my attention to this and Barry Salt has published the most complete discussion of the film, in 'The Physician of the Castle: Sight and Sound, Vol 54 no 4 (1985-6)

17 Cooper C. Graham, while a member of Leyda's seminar on Griffith Biograph Films at NYU located the notice of the US release of this film. A synopsis can be found in *Moving Picture World* Vol 2 no 13 (1908) p 270



The Lonely Villa



The Lonely Villa



The Physician of the Castle



The Physician of the Castle

not a doctor; he calls home due to car trouble, only to discover the burglary in progress; and a gypsy wagon is dragooned into the race to the rescue in place of the disabled auto).

On the level of filmic discourse, however, the differences between the two films are significant. The Pathé film has twenty-six shots while *The Lonely Villa* has fifty-two. The most significant section of hyper-editing comes with the phone call. *The Physician of the Castle* devotes only four shots to this conversation (a long shot as the physician lifts the receiver; a parallel cut to a medium closeup [framed at the bust] of his wife on the phone telling of the burglary; a similar medium closeup of the physician as he hears the news; and a return to long shot as the physician hangs up the phone). Griffith, in contrast, develops the conversation over eighteen shots, including the husband briefly rushing out to check on his car and shots of the burglars' progress. In fact the suspensefully intercut telephone conversation far surpasses the actual race to the rescue to which Griffith devotes only seven shots.

However, in researching the connection between these two films, I suddenly uncovered a number of other films from this transitional period with similar plots, which traced a path back to a 1901 play that served as the source for them all. Unfortunately, filmic analysis has to end here, since these earlier films exist only as catalogue descriptions which do not, alas, indicate the visual means of the portrayals of the telephone calls so central to their plot. But the differences in story-line command attention. The most detailed plot description comes from a film made by Edwin Porter for the Edison Company in August 1908 (between the Pathé and Biograph films) entitled *Heard over the Phone*. In contrast to the earlier demonstrations of patriarchal power restored with the aid of technology, Porter's film told a grim tale of defeat. In *Heard over the Phone* the disruption of the well-to-do suburban household comes from a hostler who is fired by the man of the house for mistreating the family's horses. As the father departs for New York City on business, the hostler vows revenge. I will quote from the film's original publicity bulletin for its description of the film's telephonic climax:

BEFORE THE STORM: Mother and Child in sitting room – Mother reading to Child – Has presentiment of danger – Hears footsteps – Rushes to 'phone.

AT HUSBAND'S OFFICE: Husband called up – Is startled – Thinks Wife unduly alarmed – Tries to allay her fears – Advises calmness.

A TERRIBLE ORDEAL: Sudden interruption (Wife drops 'phone) – a masked face at the window – Husband hears a crash of broken glass – The Hostler's entrance – Wife screams – The attack – Child's pleading.

¹⁸ *Film Index*, 5 September 1908, p. 14. I am indebted to Charles Musser for first alerting me to the existence of this film



¹⁹ *Films et cinématographes Pathé* (Paris: Pathé Co., 1907), pp. 195–6. (my translation)

AS IN A VISION: Husband wrought to a pitch of madness – In dreadful agony – Powerless to move – Hears every word – Witnesses as in a vision every scene enacted.
MOTHER LOVE: Husband hears Wife's frantic appeal for mercy – His child's prayers – The curses and denunciation of the enraged Hostler.
SUSPENSE: SILENCE – Hears Child's cry as Hostler secures her – The mother going to the rescue – The desperate struggle – The mother's cry as she regains her child – Frenzy of enraged and baffled Demon – A pistol shot – The mother's dying words as she crawls to the 'phone – The child's heart-rending sobs – Then silence.¹⁸

As anyone knows who has worked with early publicity bulletins, it is impossible to determine the visual treatment of this sequence. The text seems to indicate alternation between the two scenes. However the phrase 'As in a Vision' may indicate some form of vision superimposition modelled on the vision scene as managed in nineteenth-century theatre. As *College Chums* and *Cupid's Pranks* (1908) show, Porter was adept at split-screen images. But, even without the actual film text, the narrative description of Porter's film is striking in its contrast to both the Pathé and Biograph films. The brutal violence, the father's incapacity to do anything but listen, and the specifically technological agony of the final silence carried over the telephone line provide a nightmare revision of Griffith's rescue melodrama.

Soon after Charles Musser directed my attention to this Edison film, my colleague, André Gaudreault, responded to my search for an original French catalogue description of *The Physician of the Castle* and sent me what appeared to be the description I needed. However, on closer inspection I realized that this text from the 1907 Pathé catalogue described an earlier version of *Physician of the Castle*, entitled *Terrible angoisse*, which shared Porter's grim ending. The description reads as follows:

A successful lawyer at his country house for the summer is suddenly called to court. During his absence burglars break into his villa and the terrified young wife barely has time to rush to the telephone to call her husband. While she is telling him about the criminals, they seize her by the throat and strangle her, as well as her little boy. Hearing nothing more at the other end of the line, the devastated lawyer realizes what has happened and, mad with grief, rushes home. He throws himself on the corpses of his dear companion and his child.¹⁹

The rather shocking motifs of these two films (the destruction of a bourgeois family, technologically 'witnessed' by the *paterfamilias* who is incapable of intervening; his technological torment by sounds



Au téléphone

of unimaginable violence; and finally his devastation by deafening silence, as this aural medium mutely speaks of death) constitute the actual ur-form of *The Lonely Villa*, a nightmare of masculine impotence which the later film undoes and denies. These horrifying effects of a specifically modern agony, this demonstration of the suffering made possible through the illusory 'annihilation of space and time', are, in fact, the carefully managed effects of one of the first masters of suspense, playwright André de Lorde. De Lorde coauthored (with Charles Foley, whose short story provided the basic plot) the 1901 one act play on which all these films were based, *Au téléphone*.²⁰ Although this play premiered at the Théâtre Libre with the founder of this innovative theatre of naturalism, André Antoine, in the lead, de Lorde was best-known as the house author of the Grand Guignol, the Paris theatre of horror, and, after its premiere, *Au téléphone* soon became a well-known part of this theatre's repertoire.

The Grand Guignol had opened in Paris in 1897, featuring the grim naturalistic *rosse* plays that had shocked audiences at the Théâtre Libre a few years before, interspersed with satirical and *risqué* comedies. Working with manager Max Maury, de Lorde soon focused this formula on a particularly modern experience of agonizing suspense and horrifying climaxes. While certainly related to the nineteenth-century tradition of melodrama, The Grand Guignol differentiated itself by chronicling the triumphs of vice and the misfortunes, rather than the rewards, of virtue. Equally importantly, the theatre prided itself on its realism both in stage effects and in subject matter. De Lorde particularly sought out a modern topology of horror, introducing the operating table (*Le laboratoire des hallucinations*) and the scientific laboratory (*L'horrible expérience*), the new treatment of mental illness at Salpêtrière (*Une leçon à la Salpêtrière*), the terrors of the speeding automobile (*40 HP*), and the dangers of colonialism (*La dernière torture*) to the stage. De Lorde's plays were brief, building like Poe's tales, to a single emotional effect, one which de Lorde frequently described as 'the fear of being afraid'.²¹

Au téléphone embodies the psychological tension and the peculiarly modern effect of horror that de Lorde pursued. Its plot combines the action of *The Lonely Villa* with the ending of Porter's *Heard over the Phone* in a play consisting of two scenes in two locations. The first scene presents the vacation home of André Marex as he prepares to return to Paris on business and worries about train schedules and getting to the station on time. While the isolated location of their lonely villa has made train connections complex, Marex has had, at great expense, a telephone installed to aid his business. Using the phone to arrange a stopover at a friend's house that evening, he then departs, cautioning his wife and servant to be vigilant in his absence. After his departure, the male servant is

²⁰ To my knowledge Kemp Niver was the first scholar to note *Au téléphone* as the source for *The Lonely Villa* in Bebe Bergsten (ed.), *D. W. Griffith, His Biography Films in Perspective* (Los Angeles: John D. Roche, 1974), p. 91.

²¹ The Grand Guignol is chronicled in Mel Gordon, *The Grand Guignol: Theater of Fear and Terror* (New York: Amok Press, 1988), which includes de Lorde's essay 'Fear in Literature', and François Rivière and Gabrielle Wittkop, *Grand Guignol* (Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1979).



Le Grand Guignol

²² *Dramatic Mirror*, 11 October 1902, p. 16

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ The obvious link between Hitchcock, *Grand Guignol* and de Lorde in particular needs further investigation. The most effective scene in *Rear Window*, in which Stewart helplessly watches from across the courtyard as Grace Kelly is being beaten, clearly owes a great deal to *Au téléphone*.

²⁵ The locus classicus of this argument is Nicholas A. Vardac, *From Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968). Vardac's thesis was important for alerting film scholars to the prehistory of cinema in theatrical melodrama. However, too many scholars have adopted it too literally, ignoring the very real differences between stage craft and film editing.

drawn out of the house by a false message, leaving wife and child alone with an elderly female servant. Anxious, the wife calls her husband at the friend's home to which he had telephoned earlier. The phone call bridges the scene change, the second scene opening in the friend's apartment as the telephone rings. Marex at first tries to dispel his wife's anxiety, but suddenly she chokes with fear and Marex hears his home being broken into. He listens helplessly to the sounds of violent struggle, the screams of his child, and then complete silence. Marex cries out, 'they have murdered them', and the curtain falls.

In the play, the scene of distant violent death is conveyed only by the sounds heard over the telephone, mediated by Marex at the telephone. This technique supplied a tour de force for the actor playing Marex, through whose reactions 'the whole scene at the other end of the wire is brought vividly before the auditors', to quote a review from *The New York Dramatic Mirror*.²² Marex moves from reassuring his anxious wife with rational discourse to uttering incoherent cries, until finally 'he drops the receiver unmanned, terror struck and maddened by the thought of his impotency'.²³

Immobile, de Lorde's hero undergoes an agonizing paralysis, dramatically effective since the spectators are in the same fixed and helpless relation to unfolding events as Marex.²⁴ But if this technological torture serves mainly as a brilliant device in de Lorde's theatre of shudders, it also stands as a devastating fable of technology. Rather than allowing Marex to overcome space and time, the telephone torments him with distance and impotence. Electronic sound on the telephone can pass to and fro instantly, but the flesh and blood husband and father remains fixed and humiliated.

De Lorde frequently inverted the expected triumph of virtue in his horror plays. *La dernière torture*, for instance, deals with a group of French diplomats besieged by Chinese rebels during the Boxer Uprising. The play ends as the French consul shoots his teenage daughter in order to prevent a 'fate worse than death' if she fell into the hands of the rebels. As soon as this act of murder is completed, the distraught father discovers that colonial troops have broken the siege. Seen today, this one-act play might well appear as a dark parody of Griffith's last-minute rescues.

Following the somewhat simplistic thesis which sees cinematic techniques as an answer to the narrative demands of nineteenth-century theatre,²⁵ it might seem that parallel editing provides the perfect technical solution to the dramatic situation of *Au téléphone*. However, cinema's ability to switch between locations instantly would in fact undercut de Lorde's effect of paralysis. And Griffith (and his Pathé predecessor) seem to understand this, matching parallel editing's mastery of space and time with the narrative

transformation of the father's triumphant return in the company of the law to rescue his female family members. But if Griffith's film represents a secondary revision of de Lorde's nightmare, it also contains a moment that seems to hark back to the impotence of the ur-plot, a modified return of the repressed. Interestingly, this moment has no parallel in the simpler Pathé film. The shadow that de Lorde's ur-text casts over *The Lonely Villa* allows us to read this seemingly optimistic melodrama in another light.

This moment of extreme frustration comes when the burglars cut the telephone wire, thus creating a technological interruption which produces the greatest panic in the film, with both wife and husband making melodramatic gestures of despair (the husband in particular, staring out towards the camera, clenching his fists and bringing them to his head). The cut line brings to an end the eighteen-shot sequence which has alternated between ends of the phone line. Beyond the narrative omnipresence created by this parallel editing, this sequence also visualized a relation between husband and wife that goes beyond simple communication. Through a series of matching gestures the pair seem to be directly influencing each other physically, setting up an uncanny pattern of cause and effect.

As Rick Altman has shown in his penetrating structural analysis of *The Lonely Villa*, three times during the phone call Griffith cuts from the husband initiating a motion to the wife mirroring his gesture: first, both point toward the left presumably explaining their situations; second, as the husband tells the wife to get his revolver from his desk and fire it, he mimes pulling the trigger and the wife tries to shoot the gun; and finally the husband and wife both respond to the cut phone line by jiggling the phone switch. As Altman points out, each of these refers to a blockage in the plot (the broken down auto which the husband points towards; the unloaded revolver which does not fire, the cut phone line).²⁶ But, more explicitly, they all refer to technological breakdowns, with the cut telephone line producing the most panic. These cuts on gestures create an almost supernatural sense of the husband's ability to manipulate his wife; like a puppet master he makes the manipulative gesture which she completes as a performative gesture. The panic of the cut line produces an almost masturbatory gesture of ineffectiveness, as he seems to jiggle the phone endlessly, while the cut to his wife performing a similar gesture ironically establishes separation rather than power. The telephone connections and puppet lines have snapped.

The central technological breakdown in this triad, the misfiring revolver, may seem the weakest in terms of modernity, flanked by the stronger examples of the modes of transportation and communication. However, if slightly earlier in invention, the revolver plays a pivotal role in the technological and gendered plot. As a simple form of self protection, available at the flexing of a

²⁶ Rick Altman *The Lonely Villa and Griffith's Paradigmatic style in The Quarterly Review of Film Studies* Vol 6 no 2 (1981), pp 123-34 see particularly pp 126-7

trigger finger, the revolver allows an equality of the sexes which permits the husband to leave his wife unprotected, (one which, significantly, does not repay his confidence). In Griffith's two later dramas of railway and telegraph, *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) and *A Girl and Her Trust* (1912), it is the woman's ability to create a simulacrum of a revolver that allows her to hold invading burglars at bay until the help summoned by her telegraph can arrive

The importance of the revolver also indicates that someone at the Biograph company was aware of de Lorde's original. The removal of the bullets by the false messenger from the revolver the husband leaves for protection, as well as the departure of the servants, are details that *The Lonely Villa* shares with *Au téléphone* and which are missing from *The Physician of the Castle*. If not attributable to Griffith, this familiarity might derive from the film's scriptwriter (reputedly Mack Sennett who, in 1912, produced a comic parody of *Au téléphone* at Biograph, *Help, Help*)

If this moment of panic at technological interruption recalls the final effect of de Lorde's play, the contrasts set up by Griffith's version are also revealing. Both patriarchs are rendered hysterical by silence. In de Lorde's play the silence is the signifier of death; in Griffith's film it indicates a dead line. In *Au téléphone* it is the competence of the technological connection that causes horror – the husband can hear the murder as it takes place. In *The Lonely Villa* it is technology's malfunction that causes silence and panic. While Griffith on first sight seems to have generally whitewashed de Lorde's disturbing plot, his portrayal of technological panic may have an equally disturbing dimension.

The panic at the cut phone line parallels a transformation in the experience of technology that Schivelbusch observed in the railway. Initially train travel itself – the sensation of speed and dislocation it entailed – had caused anxiety for travellers. But as familiarity effaced fears, instead of the actual travelling causing anxiety, it was the possibility of the sudden interruption of its functioning that terrified the rail passenger and 'immediately reawakens the memory of the forgotten danger and potential violence; the repressed material returns with a vengeance'.²⁷ Like de Lorde's particularly modern horror – 'the fear of being afraid' – it was the possibility of breakdown, of catastrophic accident, that caused anxiety.

Technology appears to play a more beneficial role in Griffith's film than it does in *Au téléphone*. It is, after all, the telephone call that informs the father of his family's danger and allows him to rescue them. However, contained within this fable of the restoration of order is the panic of its interruption. This reveals an essential aspect of modern technology: its inscription of its own interruption as the sign of catastrophe.²⁸ Just beneath the surface of the smoothly-functioning system lies the threat of paralysis and impotence caused by its disruption.

²⁷ Schivelbusch *The Railway Journey* p. 132

²⁸ Mary Ann Doane's work on the portrayal of disaster on television in a paper delivered to the Columbia Seminar on Cinema 27 April 1989, entitled 'Information crisis: TV and catastrophe news coverage stimulated my thinking in this direction'

To talk by telephone, *The Lonely Villa* indicates, is to risk being cut off. To travel by car is to risk mechanical breakdown. To rely on a revolver as a means of family protection is to risk having it useless if the bullets are removed. The smooth functioning of technology glides over the abyss of anxiety at its possible sudden failure. Technology functions, as Freud indicated, as a more than mixed blessing; it becomes a system of connections and separations, of distances and proximities, or appearances and disappearances, in fact a sort of titanic game of *fort/da*, by which modernity manages its fear of loss by tying it to a secondary anxiety – that of being cut off.

The climax of *The Lonely Villa* in some sense anticipates the climax of *Intolerance* (1916) in which the race to the rescue is constructed as a race between technologies, pitting race-car against locomotive, telephone against the efficiencies of the modern gallows. The strongest closeup in this sequence from *Intolerance* enlarges the hands of the hangmen with their razors poised over the cords which will release the gallows trap and string up Bobby Harron. Griffith constructs an elaborate system here of the need to make connections (the race-car stopping the train in its tracks, the governor phoning the warden) and the ever poised terror of cutting them off. The system of *Intolerance* can be described precisely in these terms, as Griffith places long distance calls between millennia and continents, never sure if the circuits will hold. (In fact the great interpreter of modern hieroglyphic civilization, the poet Vachel Lindsay, described the film with a nearly telephonic metaphor: 'In Griffith's *Intolerance* Babylon is shown signalling across the ages to Judea . . .'²⁹) Behind the assembling of these shots stands the image of the razor, the cutting implement that precedes the suture. And complexly situated, the spectator is placed to make these connections, a switchboard operator of narrative messages.

In *The Lonely Villa*, parallel cutting portrays a telephone conversation, visually conveying an aural experience. In *Au téléphone* the sound heard over the phone horribly calls us to imagine unseen atrocities. (Before the break-in becomes obvious, Marex had been romantically speaking to his wife saying, 'You are close to me – I hear the slightest inflection of your voice – almost every movement – can very nearly see you – yes, I see you, little wife'³⁰) In the play the new apparatus functions properly, driving the husband and father mad by conveying the fact that there is ultimately nothing more to hear. In the film the panic of interrupted communication galvanizes the head of the family into frenzied action, reaching home just in time. But before the restoring action there comes the crucial moment of interruption. De Lorde casts his shadow over this rescue melodrama by revealing at its centre this image of the hysterical father, profoundly cut off.

Interestingly, adaptations of *Au téléphone* did not end with *The*

²⁹ This comment contained in a 1917 review of Hugo Munster's *The Photoplay: a Psychological Study* in *The New Republic* is reprinted in George C. Pratt (ed.) *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973) pp. 224–7.

³⁰ André de Lorde: *At the Telephone* in *One Act Plays for Stage and Study* p. 398.

31 The excellent scholar Yuri

Tsivian mistakenly attributes the ending of this film which returns to de Lorde's original, to Russian melancholia in *Silent Witnesses Russian Films, 1908-19* (London: British Film Institute 1989), p. 24

Lonely Villa. Besides Sennett's 1912 parody, I have traced descriptions of a film from the independent Phoenix Company, *The Telephone Call* (1909), as well as versions by other important directors, such as Abel Gance's *Au secours* (1923) with Max Linder, which concludes with a witty send-up of the Grand Guignol standard, a Russian version from 1914 by Yakov Protazanov,³¹ and Lois Weber's *Suspense* (1913) which is perhaps the single most original one reeler from the period of transition to features. Further, Griffith's later Biograph films include a large number of technological plots, among them *Death's Marathon* (1912) in which a dissolute father threatens suicide over the telephone and eventually commits it (when a last minute rescue by friends fails) as his wife listens on the other end of the line.

While the imagery I have invoked from these fables of modernity clearly calls up a series of Freudian concepts, my use of Freud has been somewhat perverse. Following Benjamin's lead in his essay 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire', I have tried to use Freudian concepts of castration and the *fort/da* game historically, as images that convey deeper strata of the experience of modernity, rather than as eternal aspects of human nature. Freud himself was often explicit on the role that modern technology played in either causing or revealing the nature of psychic trauma, from the relation between hysteria and the train accident, so important at the beginning of his career, to the war-time traumas that inspired his later speculations on the death drive. While for Freud the technical and historical aspects are ultimately superficial, it may well be that part of the nature of modernity is to call into question the relation between surface and depth, an inversion that Freud was instrumental in initiating, by directing attention to accidental acts of daily life and the nonsense of dreams. In the ongoing investigation of the history of early film Freud may – even unwillingly – provide us with profound insights into the dream world of technology.

Slightly different versions of this article were presented at the Society for Cinema Studies Conference in Washington D.C. in 1990 and the Film Colloquium at the University of Wisconsin in Madison 1990. I want to thank the audiences of both presentations for their comments. I would also like to thank Joyce Jesionowski and Kevin Heffernan for their help in making the illustrations.

That special thrill: *Brief Encounter*, homosexuality and authorship

ANDY MEDHURST

A gay text is one which lends itself to the hypothesis of a gay reading, regardless of where the author's genitals were wont to keep house.

Gregory Woods¹

... finished reading Present Laughter. What a wonderful play it would be if – as Coward must have wanted – all those love affairs were about homosexuals

Sir Peter Hall²

Death In Venice gives gay people a special thrill, and therefore it is gay novel.

Delegate at the 1987 International Scientific Conference on Lesbian and Gay Studies³

Authorship is hardly a hot issue these days. The very word itself conjures up ancient dusty battles over the cultural legitimacy of cinema, battles that were fought, won and forgotten long ago. The idea that a film's director is the primary, shaping source of its meaning is simultaneously inscribed as middlebrow commonsense (see the film review columns of *The Observer*, *City Limits*, or any publication targeted at the bourgeois intelligentsia, with their umbilical linking of film title and director's name) and dismissed as hopelessly outmoded by every branch of recent critical theory. It is a dead debate, and its tombstone was the BFI Reader *Theories of Authorship*,⁴ which offered an inbuilt teleology, a narrative trajectory which led me, as a postgraduate student, away from the embarrassments of romantic individualism to the chastening rigours

¹ Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-Eroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 4

² John Goodwin (ed.), *Peter Hall's Diaries* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p. 229

³ Quoted by Maurice van Lieshout 'The context of gay writing and reading' in D. Altman et al. (eds), *Homosexuality: Which Homosexuality?* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1989), p. 113

⁴ John Caughie (ed.), *Theories of Authorship* (London: Routledge/Kegan Paul/British Film Institute, 1981)

of poststructuralist thought. It was a tempting package, and I bought the whole deal – the Author was, beyond question, buried, and Roland Barthes led the funeral procession.

My induction into this orthodoxy coincided, however with my growing engagement with the politics of gay culture, and here a different version of Barthes (that most rapturously polysemic and flirtatiously comic of writers) was important. I became increasingly interested in gay men's specific ways of seeing the world – what one might call, to use a now unfashionable phrase of Raymond Williams, male homosexual structures of feeling – but to qualify for inclusion in this framework, texts had to pass an 'authorship test' ('is/was he gay?') that harked back to the bad old days of crudely biographical criticism. There seemed to be a double standard at work, albeit one rooted in political expediency – Authorship was bad, Gay Authorship was good.

That distinction, shockingly banal though it is, has been hard to shake from my mind, and its persistence is one of the things I want to explore in this article. I also want to address two more complex issues in textual and sexual theory: firstly, the political implications of poststructuralist attempts to discredit notions of authorial agency, and secondly, the related debates in gay theory around what have come to be known as the poles of 'essentialism' and 'social constructionism' (terms I will elaborate on later). I want to use one film as a springboard into these questions – *Brief Encounter* (1945), written by Noel Coward and directed by David Lean. This is not, I suspect, the most obvious of choices, so perhaps some explanation is necessary.

It is part of the accumulated folk wisdom of gay male subcultures that the homosexuality of an individual will reveal itself primarily through matters of taste – not good or bad taste but *particular* taste, a fondness for certain cultural artefacts above others, a set of preferences that proclaim one's sexual affiliations as clearly as any sloganeering T-shirt. For British gay men, at least those of my acquaintance, loving *Brief Encounter* is one such marker. One reason for this, I would suggest, is that *Brief Encounter* is not simply the tearful tale of heterosexual romance that it appears to be; beneath, or alongside, or overlapping this narrative is another, quite specifically related to the homosexuality of its author. Employing the naively biographical paradigm of Gay Authorship, *Brief Encounter* shows Noel Coward displacing his own fears, anxieties and pessimism about the possibility of a fulfilled sexual relationship within an oppressively homophobic culture by transposing them into a heterosexual context. The furtiveness and fear of discovery that end Laura's and Alec's relationship comprise a set of emotions that Coward would have felt with particular force and poignancy, and which gay men ever since have responded to with recognition and admiration.

I do not offer that reading as any startling new interpretation; it is a decoding of the text that many gay men (and no doubt a sprinkling of perceptive heterosexuals) have made. One, the British gay director Richard Kwietniowski, has taken the simple reading a stage further by making the prize-winning short film, *Flames of Passion* (1990), which is both pastiche of and homage to the Coward original, reworking its iconography into an updated story of gay romance that begins with hurried glances on a station platform and, times having changed, ends with intertwined consummation on the train. His film, Kwietniowski straightforwardly claims, is one that would have been approved of by Noel Coward's unconscious.⁵

There is, then, a long-established subcultural reading of *Brief Encounter* that cuts across its ostensible/mainstream meaning, but does this have any substantive base in the text itself or is it only a collective fantasy, a shared 'special thrill'? Before tackling the theoretical problems raised by that question, it will be instructive to look at the volatile critical reputation of *Brief Encounter* within British film culture, since this can be linked very closely to shifting paradigms of authorship.



Flames of Passion (A.B.F.I.)
Production; photographer,
Tony Clancy

***Brief Encounter*, British cinema and cultural standing**

The theme and situation are universal. They belong to all human beings whether they have individually endured a similar love-tragedy or not. . . . It would be difficult to find a more profound story of distressed love in the history of the cinema.

Roger Manvell⁶

⁶ Roger Manvell, *The Film and the Public* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), pp. 156–8.

To see [*Brief Encounter*] again . . . at the Baker Street Classic, is to see another film entirely . . . the audience in this usually polite and certainly middle-class hall couldn't restrain its derision and repeatedly burst into angry exasperated laughter . . . a well-spoken young lady . . . finally cried out 'Where the hell is Milford Junction anyway?'

Raymond Durnat⁷

⁷ Raymond Durnat *A Mirror for England* (London: Faber, 1970) p. 180

More than any other single film, *Brief Encounter* has operated as a barometer of the prevailing assumptions in British film culture. It was released in December 1945, to an overwhelmingly positive critical response that praised its 'maturity' and 'realism', and also hailed it as the latest success from the Coward/Lean 'team', which had, during the Second World War, produced three notably successful films, namely *In Which We Serve* (1942), *This Happy Breed* (1944), and *Blithe Spirit* (1945). This run of critical and box-office hits prompted C. A. Lejeune, film critic of *The Observer*, to claim:

these Coward films are probably the nearest things we have to a valid modern school in British cinema. . . . You often hear people say, 'Why can't we make films over here with the taste and art and honesty of the French cinema?' In his own way, and in his own idiom, Coward does.⁸

⁸ C. A. Lejeune *Chestnuts In Her Lap* (London: Phoenix House, 1947), p. 163

What is striking here is not just the confidence of the assertion of quality, but the unquestioned awarding of the credit to Coward. The literary bias of British film reviewing has rarely been quite so plainly stated – Coward is the established name, his reputation guaranteed by years of theatrical success, hence he takes precedence over the mere maker of pictures. In 1946, however, Lean directed his first film without a Coward connection, *Great Expectations*, and the huge reputation and success this enjoyed coincided with the start of the long postwar decline suffered by Coward – the net result was that the writer's contribution to the earlier films' success became progressively marginalized, a state of affairs hardly helped by the increasing influence of French auteurist models of film analysis on British critics.

Roger Manvell's *The Film and the Public*, published in 1955, still held *Brief Encounter* in very high esteem, placing it in a chapter rather disingenuously called 'A miscellany of films' but which is clearly intended to signify a pantheon of cinematic greats. (There are extremely instructive comparisons to be made between the films that make up Manvell's 'Miscellany' and the 'Pantheon' of directors listed in the first, 1962, issue of *Movie* – the changes are an eloquently stark illustration of the massive reorientation of British film culture.) So, Coward is elevated to join the likes of *Greed* (1923) and *Paisa* (1946) and *Le jour se lève* (1939), but Manvell

9 Manvell *The Film and the Public* p 156

cautiously refuses to bestow individual plaudits, preferring to see the film as 'one of those rare films for which one can never be sure to whom the real credit is due – an example of the unity achieved by the cooperation of many creative minds' ⁹ Eventually, though, he singles out Celia Johnson's acting followed by Lean's direction. Coward was beginning to disappear.

The date of *The Film and the Public* is significant – 1955, just one year before the whole 'Angry Young Men' circus. Anger was, above all, a theatrical phenomenon and Coward exemplified the type of theatre that was under attack. The films made from 'Angry' texts seemed to mark a similarly definitive rejection of the previous orthodoxies, with *Brief Encounter* acquiring an unenviable figurehead status as the paradigmatic sexless, middle-class, British film – hence the scorn of the audience that contained Raymond Durgnat. As Durgnat himself put it, to explain the film's fall from grace, 'Jimmy Porter came along' ¹⁰

10 Durgnat *A Mirror for England*, p 180

There are subtexts here concerned with gender and sexuality. It is Coward who is singled out for specific blame by Durgnat, his screenplay compared explicitly/dismissively to women's romance fiction as if that, by itself, was a confirmation of worthlessness. More generally, the 'Angry' movement had been characterized by strong antihomosexual prejudices (John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* are full of bullishly heterosexual scorn for 'effeminacy') which found Coward an ideal target. If *Brief Encounter* were to be critically favoured at all, it had to be rescued from the discredited label of Coward and conclusively assigned to the body of texts marked 'Lean'. This process, begun in 1946 with the acclaim for *Great Expectations*, reached its peak with the 1974 publication of *Masterworks of the British Cinema*, a book that included the script of *Brief Encounter* but zealously forbade its readers to praise the man who wrote it: '*Brief Encounter*, indeed, constitutes almost a declaration of independence on Lean's part from his fruitful but by 1945 no doubt increasingly constricting association with Coward's writing.'¹¹ The hegemonic assurance of that 'no doubt' speaks volumes – the Author was dead, long live the auteur. Or, in terms of the concerns of this article, the gay writer had been effaced, leaving a blemish-free heterosexual text.

11 John Russell Taylor (ed.), *Masterworks of the British Cinema* (London: Lorrimer 1974) pp 10–11

Authorship, biography and sexuality

Victor: I'm glad I'm normal

Amanda: What an odd thing to be glad about.¹²

12 Noel Coward *Private Lives* in *Play Parade* (London: Heinemann, 1934), p 480

While I would insist on the centrality of Noel Coward's sexuality to the patterns of meanings that I see in *Brief Encounter*, I would not wish for one second to hold him up as any kind of gay martyr. The mythologies of tragic sacrifice that have coalesced around gay writers

like Oscar Wilde and Joe Orton tend only to impede a fully contextual understanding of how their sexuality and textuality inform each other. I have no desire to add Coward to that mythology, besides which he was, judging by the biographies and his own diaries, an intolerable man – snobbish, reactionary, racist, lamenting Labour election victories and the decline of Empire, welcoming Gandhi's assassination, oozing sycophancy towards the British (and any other) royal family, and describing the Beatles as 'bad-mannered little shits'. Coward was not, to use a rather tired phrase, a positive role model.

Nonetheless, his plays (including *Still Life*, on which *Brief Encounter* was based) can be productively mined for half-hidden endorsements of sexual options that strayed beyond the expected confines of domesticated heterosexual monogamy. This can partly be accounted for by the social milieu in which many of them are set, that stereotypically 'Cowardian' world of elegant hotel bedrooms where the cocktail shaker is always within reach. Otto in *Design For Living* can boast that

'Our lives are diametrically opposed to ordinary social convention. We've jilted them and eliminated them and we've got to find our own solutions for our own peculiar moral problems . . . We're not doing any harm to anyone else. We're not peppering the world with illegitimate children. The only people we could possibly mess up are ourselves, and that's our lookout. . . . Therefore the only thing left is to enjoy it thoroughly, every rich moment of it, every thrilling second. . . '

13 Noel Coward, *Design For Living*, in *Play Parade* pp. 404–5

because he lives a life where material luxury has bought him out of the social expectations imposed on less fortunate people. In the same play comes the following exchange

Gilda: 'If we were ordinary, moral, high-thinking citizens we shouldn't have had an affair at all.'

14 *Ibid.* p. 361

Leo: 'Perhaps not. We should have crushed it down.'

which, in many ways, is the entire story of *Brief Encounter* encapsulated in two lines.

Moreover, even when Coward seems to be advocating sexual experimentation, he stops far short of specific details. As Alan Sinfield has put it, he 'validates deviant sexuality when it is part of a general bohemianism' but nothing more concretely radical is put forward.¹⁵

15 Alan Sinfield, 'Who was afraid of Joe Orton?' *Textual Practice*, vol. 4 no. 2 (1990) p. 270

Perhaps now might be the point to question whether this type of analysis belongs in *Screen* at all – isn't it unreconstructed literary criticism of the most discredited kind, combing through the textual evidence to find traces of what the author 'really thought'? I plead guilty, partly, but in my defence I want to return to the point I signalled earlier, that a biographical approach has more political

Brief Encounter (Courtesy of
the Rank Organization plc and
B.F.I. stills archive)



justification if the project being undertaken is one concerned with the cultural history of a marginalized group. To be sure, we have all moved on since films directed by Hitchcock were unravelled in the search for strands of 'Catholic guilt', but equally I still teach gay students who find it genuinely empowering to learn of the homosexuality of a cultural figure as one contributing factor to the work that he/she produced.

It is also important to stress that this reclaiming of Coward as relevant to gay culture is very different from the limiting ways in which some heterosexual critics have mobilized the fact of his sexuality. What happens there is that a 'really gay' reading of Coward is put into play, much as I have already done with *Brief Encounter*, but on the grounds that a homosexual writer can *only* write about homosexuality (analogous cases would be the insistence that Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* is 'really' about a gay couple, or that Tennessee Williams's Blanche Dubois is nothing but a transposed drag queen). I would refer back to Sir Peter Hall's comment on *Present Laughter* here – for him the failure of that play is in direct proportion to its not being about homosexuals. In this way the homosexual writer is granted a dubious measure of liberal pity ('if only he hadn't lived in such a repressive world') while at the same time the heterosexual critic distances the threatening possibility that a homosexual writer might have a great many insights into the codes, mechanisms and ideologies of

heterosexuality itself. That such insights are available to gay people (whether we are writers or not) should come as no surprise – from birth we are relentlessly socialized into a heterosexual identity that we may later choose to reject but which remains an always familiar landscape – those on the margins of a culture know more about its centre than the centre can ever know about the margins.

The importance of Coward for gay culture is not simply one of thematics; there are also broader, crucial but treacherously nebulous questions of tone, attitude and feeling. What I want to get at through these quicksand-like words is how Coward shared and contributed to making the male homosexual structure of feeling that I and many other contemporary gay men find in his writing. Richard Dyer has described how Coward's songwriting, along with that of other gay lyricists like Cole Porter and Lorenz Hart, can be productively reread in terms of their specifically homosexual perception of the double-edged nature of romantic love – simultaneously wanting it desperately to happen but convinced of the impossible ridiculousness of any such desire.¹⁶ That sense of 'bitter-sweet' (the title, perhaps not incidentally, of one of Coward's greatest stage successes) strikes me as a crucial component of the structure of feeling I am interested in here. Dyer's list of songwriters could be updated, for example, to include the Pet Shop Boys, whose records plug directly into that passionate desire/impossibility of fulfilment bitter-sweet double-bind (a song like *Rent* exemplifies this). Connoisseurs of the self-referentiality of gay culture might care to note that the Pet Shop Boys' Neil Tennant frequently lists Coward's *Sail Away* as one of his favourite songs – it is hard to conceive of any other contemporary pop star having the wit or sly wisdom to make such a choice.

If plays like *Design For Living* or *Private Lives* foreground the witty, hedonistic, passionately abandoned side of the bitter-sweet couplet, then *Brief Encounter* is the key text of the opposite side. It is a text which explores the pain and grief caused by having one's desires destroyed by the pressures of social convention and it is this set of emotions which has sustained its reputation in gay subcultures. I ought to add, perhaps, that gay men do not regard this film with nothing but sad, solemn recognition – the characteristically gay male urge to mock and undercut what one genuinely and deeply feels, what Dyer brilliantly calls 'the knife edge between camp and hurt',¹⁷ can be evidenced by pointing out that one of London's most crowded and cruisy gay bars is called 'Brief Encounter', though one is, alas, unlikely to meet anyone resembling Trevor Howard therein.

Gregory Woods's remark, quoted at the beginning of this article, suggests, in a rather deliriously utopian, post-Barthes kind of way, that any text can be opened up to a gay interpretation if gay readers decide it to be appropriate – authorial intention is here surrendered in favour of a sort of subcultural authorship, a collective 'special

¹⁶ Richard Dyer 'Judy Garland and gay men' in *Heavenly Bodies* (London: British Film Institute/Macmillan 1987) p. 154.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

18 Alison Hennegan 'On becoming a lesbian reader' in S Radstone (ed.) *Sweet Dreams Sexuality Gender and Popular Fiction* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1988) pp 165-91

thrill', a method of analysis based on a recognition of shared structures of feeling. Similarly, Alison Hennegan has described how as a teenager she hunted out lesbian fiction and based her decisions to investigate one text rather than another on clues as vague and 'irrational' as a publisher's logo or a particular chapter title.¹⁸ Hunches these may have been, but they were almost always right – critical theory may not have the language to describe this method of discovering homosexually-relevant material, but as a subcultural practice, a particularly attuned set of decoding skills, it undoubtedly exists, as I and any other gay person can testify

Knowing an author's homosexuality makes that decoding far easier (if at the same time rather less triumphant – there's an undeniable pleasure in finding out that a favourite writer, actor or director you have admired for years turns out to be gay, as you always privately hoped and 'knew') but it returns us once again to the problem of biography, the danger of regressing to a simplistic reading of texts which simply locates their meanings in the author's life story. Yet this is a problem that needs to be faced, because the reading of *Brief Encounter* that I have outlined reintroduces into the critical game that most awkward of players – the historical, flesh-and-blood person of the author

The Author has staggered from the deathbed, so is it time for critical analysis to pay attention to real people's lived lives, their traceable, material existences? If so, there is much rethinking to be done, for the theoretical paradigms that have dominated the last twenty years have nothing resembling an adequate critical framework for dealing with a factor as flagrantly nonabstract, as defiantly corporeal, as embarrassingly tangible as this

Essences, sensibilities, identities

There is a danger, though, that the kind of gay cultural archaeology described above (a sort of retrospective 'outing') can degenerate into the construction of an ahistorical 'gay sensibility'. The appeal for tolerance by gesturing to lists of Famously Artistic Homosexuals is one of the classic tropes of gay self-justification – it goes 'Sappho, Michaelangelo, Shakespeare . . . and me' – and it needs always to be resisted because it seeks to extend contemporary definitions of sexuality back to incorporate historical periods when categorizations of the sexual were quite different. In short, the 'gay sensibility' is a rhetorical deployment of essentialism.

The essentialist view of homosexuality seeks to forge links between all people who enjoy same-sex relations, regardless of gender, race, age, class or period. It is, on any logical grounds, patently nonsensical, as Jeffrey Weeks has argued

we cannot simply assume that nothing changes, that gays and

19 Jeffrey Weeks *Against Nature*, in Altman et al *Homosexuality Which Homosexuality?* p. 206

lesbians have always existed as we exist today . . . that there is a mystical continuity between our desires and their desires across the range of cultures and histories. We do not do it for any other aspect of our social existence. We should not do it for our sex.¹⁹

Opposing that essentialist version of homosexuality is an analysis which, drawing above all on the work of Foucault, sees homosexuality as a social construction, culturally and historically specific, sensitive to cultural and historical change.

This 'social constructionism' can in turn be linked to that whole shift in critical thinking which has sought to undermine any credibility in the unified subject as a source of meaning, and most crucial here has been the contribution of psychoanalysis. These arguments are more than familiar to readers of this journal and, considered purely as philosophical debates, they are impressively rigorous and difficult to refute. Where they become problematic, especially for members of marginalized cultural groups, is in what they begin to mean if we take them out of the pristine hot-house of the academy and put them into the messy struggles of day-to-day life.

To regard homosexuality as a social construction and nothing more is, potentially, to put another weapon in the hands of those who would like to see it quite literally erased from the world – if it can be constructed, then it can be deconstructed, so what are all those queers still doing here? Gay intellectuals may dismiss essentialism as a bogus utopia, but it has provided the emotional power behind a great deal of gay activism – it is much harder to claim civil rights for a discursive construction. The pragmatism of political urgency must be allowed to sully the purity of intellectual thought, what is needed, at least in the short term, is what Gayatri Spivak has referred to as a kind of 'strategic essentialism'.²⁰ Otherwise marginalized groups run the risk of theorizing themselves out of existence.

Besides which, what is so attractive about this surrendering of unitary identity, this fetish for fragmentation that characterizes so much of modern intellectual life? Is it always a good idea to slaughter the Author? Three quotations from feminist, black and gay perspectives, helpfully problematize that question:

... the postmodernist decision that the Author is dead, and subjective agency along with him, does not necessarily work for women and prematurely forecloses the question of identity for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production, that men have had, women have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc.²¹

It never surprises me when black folks respond to the critique of essentialism, especially when it denies the validity of identity

20 Spivak cited in Judith Butler 'Gender trouble: feminist theory and psychoanalytic discourse' in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1990) p. 325

21 Nancy K. Miller 'Changing the subject: authorship, writing and the reader' in Teresa de Lauretis (ed.) *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (London: Macmillan 1986) p. 106

politics, by saying 'Yeah, it's easy to give up identity when you got one'. Should we not be suspicious of postmodern critiques of the 'subject' when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time . . .²²

²² Bell Hooks, 'Postmodern Blackness' in *Yearning* (London Turnaround, 1991) p. 28

Narrative identification . . . is being rejected at a point in time when gays can claim they still have not had it. An initial period of identification is important to a repressed group that has *never* had adequate self-images.²³

²³ Paul Hallam and Ronald L. Peck 'Images of homosexuality' *Gay Left*, no. 5 (1977) p. 25

The last of those three comments was, it is true, written almost fifteen years ago, long before the more than 'adequate' gay images of *My Beautiful Laundrette* or *Law of Desire* or *Torch Song Trilogy*, but I think the general point stands: before we stampede to dispense with 'identity', let us consider whether it still has its uses as a rallying point for political action. Postmodernism is less liberating for some social groups than for others – though there is a point to be made here about the extremely close links between postmodernism as a general theoretical superstructure and camp as a specific homosexual practice. I have, perhaps rashly, elsewhere published the baldly provocative claim that 'postmodernism is only heterosexuals catching up with camp'²⁴ and I think the relationship between the two discourses remains a fruitful area for further study. Crudely, the sense of blurred boundaries, of disrupted hierarchies, of disrespectful, intertextual playfulness, of the delight in superficiality and the wearing of cultural masks – all these were fundamental to the strategies of camp long before postmodernism lurched into view. One of the key crossover texts, perhaps, is Barthes's *Mythologies*, for what is that but a series of camp readings? Name one heterosexual male theorist who could display such interest in wrestling, washing powders and Greta Garbo.

²⁴ Andy Medhurst 'Pitching Camp' *City Limits*, 10–17 May 1990

Authorship is identity in the textual sphere, and hence gay people, like all marginal groups, have, at present, a political stake in wanting to hold on to the Author despite her/his expulsion from prevailing postmodernist theories. We need to construct our histories through examining the records left by those who went before us, not in a blunderingly literal-minded fashion that sees fictional texts as factual 'evidence', but by studying how texts mediate the contradictions and challenges faced by those who carried a homosexual identity through a heterosexual world. This can only be done, of course, with authors who lived within modern categorizations of sexuality – but that period, after all, does include the entire history of the cinema.

²⁵ For more substantial reading around this question see Carole S. Vance 'Social construction theory: problems in the history of sexuality', in Altman et al., *Homosexuality: Which Homosexuality?*, pp. 13–25 and Diana Fuss *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge 1989).

To see essentialism and social constructionism as polarized opposites may be useful for rhetorical purposes, but any fully-sensitive analysis of culture and sexuality must constantly negotiate between the two.²⁵ Organizing around the politics of identity may

well overlook the troubled, shifting role of the unconscious in the formation of subjectivities, but such exquisite philosophical niceties often have to be shelved when dealing with palpable, material discrimination. I have read my Foucault, I am aware of the conceptual shortcomings of a timeless, essentialist homosexual identity, I might even want to take the step of putting quotation marks around the word 'gay' – but the man who queerbashed me some years ago did not put quotation marks around his fists. An emotive example, to be sure, but sexuality is not a topic from which emotion can be expelled, because the categories of sexuality are experiential. I cannot be purely theoretical about homosexuality, because I am not a purely theoretical homosexual. Neither was Noel Coward, and, despite the multitude of other differences between us, that shared fact persists and continues to inform, shape and intensify my love of *Brief Encounter* and the tears it always makes me shed

Condition critical

PETER KEIGHRON

For some thirty years now we have been swamped with books, journals, articles and debates on the theory of cultural politics and the politics of culture. The rapid growth of film and media studies in colleges and schools has been dominated and shaped by the cultural theories of the left. And yet in 1984 Colin McArthur could justifiably complain about

. the lamentable failure of left periodicals such as *Marxism Today* and *New Socialist* to operate a sustained, as opposed to intermittent, engagement with cinema and television. As with so much else, Gramscian ideas about the political centrality of culture seem beyond the scope of the orthodox left in Britain ¹

¹ Colin McArthur, 'British film reviewing a complaint', *Screen*, vol 26 no 1 (1985) pp 79-85

Six years on and the left's critical engagement with cinema and television is even less sustained, even more fragmented. While left academics queue up to deliver their twenty thousand words worth on the latest nuance of postmodernism, we look in vain for two hundred words on a new film or television programme.

What follows is an attempt to understand some of the historical problems of left film and television criticism and to encourage debate about its future.

² *Distant Voices Still Lives* (Terence Davies BFI in association with Film Four Productions 1988)

³ *A Very British Coup* (writer, Alan Plater director, Mick Jackson Skreba Films/Parallax Pictures for Channel Four. First screened on Channel Four 9.15 pm, for three Sundays from 19 June 1988 to 3 July 1988)

As a starting point I will look at the left's critical response to two recent films – *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988)² and *A Very British Coup* (1988).³ The choice of examples is not, of course, arbitrary. These two films confront various issues of class and politics in British society and history and should, therefore, be 'home ground' for the left, providing an obvious and urgent point of political intervention. But, before we turn to the left's criticism, it is both necessary and instructive to look at how the dominant rightwing, or

4 McArthur British film reviewing
a complaint p 79

5 John Ellis, Art culture and
quality terms for a cinema in
the 40s and 70s *Screen*, vol
19 no 3 (1978) pp 9–50

6 Pierre Bourdieu quoted in N
Garnham and R Williams *Pierre
Bourdieu and the sociology of
culture an introduction Media
Culture & Society* vol 2 no 3
(1980) p 214

what I have termed here ‘mainstream criticism’, dealt with these films. Their criticism must come first because, as McArthur notes, the ‘agenda setting power over the terms in which cinema is consumed in Britain remains with the Fleet Street [Wapping] nexus and their clones in television. It is they, above all, who require interrogating when questions about film reviewing are posed’⁴ Reviews are particularly interesting because, as John Ellis says, they can reveal ‘a certain relationship between a film and a privileged group who operate with remarkably similar aesthetic prescriptions’⁵

The political art of mainstream criticism

The key concept that floats to the top in mainstream criticism of *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* is that of art. The artistic merits of the film are unanimously praised within the ‘quality’ press, the only contention being as to whether it is a ‘near masterpiece’ (Richard Nagire, *The Sunday Times*, 16 October 1988) or an unqualified ‘masterwork’ (*The Mail on Sunday*, 16 October 1988) At the very least it is a ‘genuine work of art’ (Angus Woolf-Murray, *The Scotsman*, 19 August 1988) that will ‘secure a place in the history of English art, alongside Lowry or Lawrence’ (David Robinson, *The Times*, 13 October 1988).

But the celebration of this act of creation is not offered as a simple honouring of ‘pure’ beauty, for the concept of art within which this praise is offered honours the film as much for what it is not as for what it is. Thus Terence Davies is to be congratulated for having ‘wrenched high art from the lower depths of his deprived Liverpool childhood’ (*The Mail on Sunday*, 16 October 1988), which is a ‘recreation devoutly to be wished’ and not least because ‘he has done it without rancour’ (how typically British). Here we find a perfect example of Bourdieu’s contention that ‘Art is the site par excellence of the denial of the social world.’⁶ Terence Davies has apparently emerged from the representation of his social origins smelling of Art, and it is this very concept which mainstream criticism just cannot get enough of, for at its best (its most effective) it denies the social world at the very moment that it represents it

Such criticism leads us directly to the higher plains of aestheticism from where it becomes possible to adopt a universal outlook, a point of view based on the sort of timeless values that enable one to study objectively (unsentimentally, unemotionally and ‘without rancour’) the lower depths of social reality. Any grubby social thoughts the film might have evoked can be swiftly rejected in favour of a more universal muse. Thus we are told by Robinson that *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* is not really about working-class family life in Liverpool at all, for this is simply ‘a metaphor for the human condition that strikes universal chords’—chords which ring true through ages past,



Distant Voices, Still Lives (All stills from this production are courtesy of Channel Four)



Distant Voices, Still Lives



Distant Voices, Still Lives

7 Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Aristocracy of Culture', *Media, Culture & Society*, no. 2 (1980), p. 250

8 Ibid., p. 252

present and future, inspiring Beryl Bainbridge to opine that 'I don't think anything alters. We are all victims of the past . . . it could be anywhere' (*The Independent*, 13 October 1988). By this fantastic ideological wrench these critics are able to turn the world upside-down to prove that those films that appear ' . . . most local and concentrated are often the most universal in appeal' (Philip French, *The Observer*, 16 October 1988).

The point of this distinction between the social (the particular) and the artistic (the general) is precisely to deny there is any 'real' distinction to be made at all. For we are all, whatever our social position, essentially judged by the same universal values.

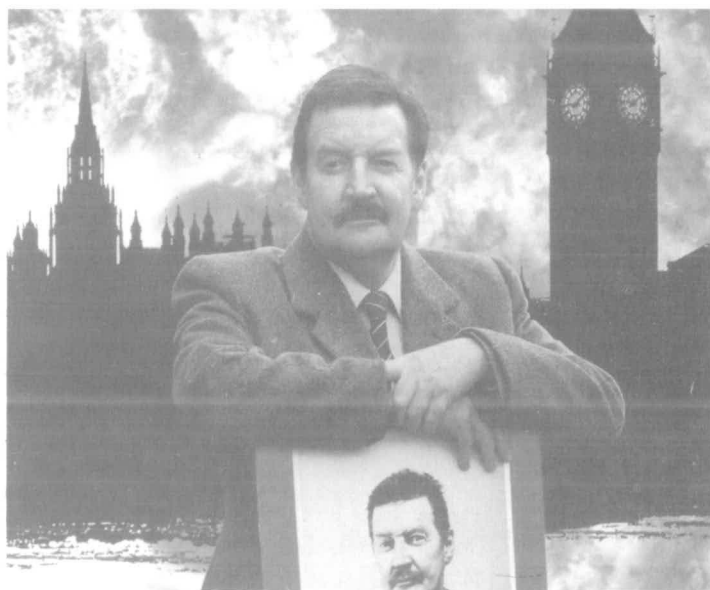
Faced with a film that shouts of class society, poverty and history, mainstream criticism reaches for Art to apply a gloss of universal values. Bainbridge pauses only to 'thank God for those who died a thousand deaths through poverty. At least they knew why they suffered.' And such self-knowledge apparently breeds an admirable philosophy of stoicism and passivity in the poor who, according to Woolf-Murray, 'carried their burdens without complaint because they were theirs and that was all'. But exactly how does this all-pervasive apolitical concept of art become so suffocatingly effective?

Mainstream criticism of *Distant Voices, Still Lives* constantly referred the film both to art in general and to particular works of art. Lawrence, Larkin, Lowry, T. S. Eliot and even the image of a 'proletarian Proust' are dutifully lined up to create an appropriate artistic canon within which the film may take its rightful place. The purpose of all this cross-referencing and analogizing is not to gain knowledge of the text (or of art in general) but to function, as Bourdieu suggests, 'to bring the work into an interminable circuit of inter-legitimation'.⁷ The outcome of this circuit is the creation of the world of art and its corresponding world of art criticism which, while claiming to inform, functions primarily to exclude, creating what Bourdieu calls 'the enchantment of artistic contemplation'.⁸ It is exclusive inasmuch as it demands a recognition of a continuously expanding number of works of art, a process which finds its correlative in cultural criticism's developing complexity of coding, with the result that works of art and their criticism becomes increasingly 'difficult', forever demanding more time and more money to 'appreciate'. Thus, in order to fully appreciate *Distant Voices, Still Lives*, we would have to be familiar with the work of Lowry, Lawrence, Larkin et al – and to fully appreciate their work in turn demands familiarity with numerous other texts and artists, and so it goes on. And who is being excluded in this process? Most obviously the very people who *Distant Voices, Still Lives* is about – the working class.

When we turn to *A Very British Coup*, it is clear that the approaches which allowed mainstream critics to exclude any 'extraneous talk of politics' in reviews of *Distant Voices, Still Lives*

could not be applied here, for this is a film which does little else than talk of politics. Its most serious claim is that if a Labour Party, elected on a socialist manifesto, attempted to carry out reforms which would seriously shift the balance of power in favour of working-class people, then the ruling class, aided and abetted by the media and US interests, would undermine and eventually overthrow them.

In facing such a directly political proposal, mainstream reviews reverted to some tried and trusted critical tools in order to reaffirm the gap between fact and fiction, politics and culture, that the film is attempting to narrow. *A Very British Coup* uses a fictional form to argue that its political content is, or could be, factual. Mainstream criticism responds by claiming that both form and content are fictional.



A Very British Coup (Courtesy of Channel Four)

In some ways the task of denying the programme's (political) content is made easier by first praising its (artistic) form. By first establishing a formal highpoint, the critics are then able to look down upon the content, 'objectively' pointing out the division which they claim exists (which in fact they have helped to construct) between the two. Credit is given where credit is due. It is 'well written' (Edward Pearce, *The Sunday Times*, 13 July 1988) with a 'certain stylish force' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 4 July 1988), the 'verisimilitude achieved by . . . script and direction has been dazzling' (Paul Paterson, *The Daily Mirror*, 4 July 1988) and all are agreed that it is a 'first class production' (Edward Pearce, *The Sunday Times*, 13 July 1988). But the form is perhaps *too* good, for there is a growing fear that it will blind the viewer to the fact that

'what is at issue is the thinking' (Christopher Dunkley, *The Financial Times*, 6 July 1988). And it is here, in the 'thinking', we are told, that the programme falls down due to the 'lack of connection between reality and what you saw on the screen' (Charles Catchpole, *News of the World*, 26 June 1988). Thus *A Very British Coup* fails because, according to Pearce 'it wants to have it both ways', and instead of 'owning up to being fantastic tosh, it tried to be incredibly realistic' (Chris Tookey, *The Sunday Telegraph*, 26 June 1988). The implication here is that the programme makers know *really* that their programme's political content is 'fantastic tosh' (as we all do, don't we?) but are not 'owning up' to it. It seems that the form of the programme is dazzling to the point of dishonesty, blinding the viewer to what seems so obvious to the critic. Thus the critic's role becomes one of reminding the viewer that she/he is watching a work of fiction. 'We are talking recreational therapy, the blowing of beautiful iridescent bubbles,' states Pearce. Indeed 'the whole piece is something of a dream' (Hugo Young, *The Guardian*, 21 June 1988), in which 'you couldn't take a single thing seriously' (according to Pearce) because 'any resemblance between it and the world of 1988 is due to administrative oversight' (Patrick Stoddart, *The Sunday Times*, 26 June 1988).

The urgency which mainstream critics applied to the task of denouncing *A Very British Coup* was no doubt fuelled by the fact that the film was screened as a three-week serial, hence reviewers were in the unusual position (for TV critics) of being able to influence readers as to whether they would watch future episodes. But at times this urgency verged on desperation as we were told by Tookey that the film 'utterly fails to convince', by Frank Johnson that 'its politics are *so plainly* antideluvian', by Pearce that 'you couldn't take a single thing seriously'. Indeed 'the whole scenario is *desperately* unreal' and 'strictly for the adventure playground', according to Pearce. But does it really take a trained critic to warn viewers of what is so plainly, desperately obvious? Indeed it does, and it seems the job cannot be left to the mere television reviewer either, for criticism soon leaked from the cultural pages to the overtly political ones, even reaching as far as the editorial sections of some newspapers.

But having opened up the debate, most critics joined Pearce in immediately trying to close down the political questions raised. Pearce dismissed the programme's central theme with a pat circular argument: 'There is, and will be, no socialist revolutionary government to suppress, therefore it will not be suppressed.' Besides confusing the reformist Labour government in *A Very British Coup* with a revolutionary one, he denies the central claim of the programme – that a reformist (let alone a revolutionary) government *would* be suppressed – and hence avoids discussion of the important

questions this raises about the British system of parliamentary democracy Pearce concludes:

the truth is that the far left is no longer that important. It does not have the arithmetic to make any sensible capitalist take time off from lunch (*The Sunday Times*, 3 July 1988)

Judging by the amount of political column inches devoted to stating the 'obvious' irrationality of the programme's political contentions, it would appear that one or two 'sensible' capitalist newspaper owners and editors did take time off from lunch to ensure the sensible British public did not get the wrong idea about *A Very British Coup*

They are two very different films then, the one classified as pure art, the other as pure entertainment. And, politics well aside, what unites them is precisely their purity, the fact that they can both be reduced to a matter of pure taste. The mainstream critics' thankless task (their privilege) is only completed when every last cultural product is herded into this universal corral of taste where, to quote Bourdieu once more, 'the most classifying privilege has the privilege of appearing to be the most natural one'.⁹

So much for the mainstream, but how successful were the left at staying afloat in, or even swimming against, this formidable rightward moving tide?

9 Bourdieu The Aristocracy of Culture p 253

In search of an alternative

In turning to the left criticism of *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *A Very British Coup*, we need to make a distinction between what I shall term the 'core' and the 'periphery' journals. The core here refers to those journals which exist to promote left political comment and whose cultural criticism might therefore be expected to be consistently oppositional. The periphery refers to practically anywhere (including the mainstream and 'quality' press we have already looked at) that oppositional or, as is more likely, alternative criticism might occur.

Given the number of left journals that declined to review *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*, my summary of them will be all too brief. Most left journals were either unwilling, or unable, to use the film to initiate any political criticism or debate. Most had nothing at all to say about it and those that did comment relied to a large extent on a discourse and terminology borrowed from the 'agenda setting nexus' of mainstream criticism.

Those that did criticize or review the film, while being in total agreement with the mainstream that it was a 'good film', were unable to find any particularly political reasons for such valuations. Maureen Watson's review (*Socialist Worker*, 26 October 1988)

began with an assessment of the film's reception within mainstream criticism. Watson duly noted the amount of 'gushing praise' the film was receiving, asked what all the 'fuss' was about and, on finding no real answer, concluded that the reviews were 'a bit over the top'. Despite these reservations she thought that it was a good film but at the same time she upheld a longstanding tradition in *Socialist Worker* of avoiding any discussion of what a 'good film' might be.

The only other substantial left review was to be found in *The Morning Star* where Jeff Sawtell found the film politically distinctive because it was (unusually) a film 'from *wuthun* the class' rather than simply being *about* the class. The implied value of this being that like the sixties social realist films, such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *This Sporting Life* (1963), it was a film that working-class people could relate to on an emotional level because 'it so closely resembles aspects of your own life'. Thus Sawtell 'sat transfixed by the film's sheer beauty and its evident sympathy and understanding of post-war Britain's working-class culture' (*Morning Star*, 14 October 1988).

Moving outside of the core into the periphery, the reviews here tended to echo mainstream criticism in applauding the film's universal and aesthetic values. Thus according to David Wilson, 'it is a film rooted in personal memory but transcending it'. Hence its 'substance [its historically and socially specific setting] is mysteriously made something else' (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1988). And this, according to Brian Baxter, is all the work of Terence Davies, a 'potentially great artist' who has 'evoked memories and then shaped them, as a painter or poet distills such images, into a coherent whole' (*Films and Filming*, October 1988). Interviews with the director (in *City Limits* and *Time Out*) and reviews in film journals further emphasized aesthetic merits and attempted to place the film within an artistic-cinematic canon—dare one mention the greatest of all directors, Bresson? (Brian Baxter, *Films and Filming*, October 1988).

Nevertheless, reviews within the periphery did begin to deal with the relationship between form and content in far more radical ways than left or core reviews were prepared to do and were even able to hint at possible political meanings that might be derived from this process. Baxter, for instance, concluded that it was a 'fierce movie . . . a social tract and a revolutionary one', but, although he had been able to explain the way the film had produced such 'fierce' effects, he was unable, or not sufficiently politically motivated, to explain why it was so 'revolutionary' as a 'social tract'.

On the whole then, left criticism of *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* was a missed opportunity to develop an effective political analysis of a 'popular' film. But perhaps the critics hesitated when faced by a film whose politics were rarely foregrounded. Surely when we turn to such a blatantly political film as *A Very British Coup*, it should be a

different story. For here was a film that was quite obviously intent on initiating debate around important contemporary issues such as parliamentary democracy, the Labour Party, the role of the state, the role of the press, and so on. All issues which the core left journals, and the left in general, spend most of their time and printed space debating. So, given that the screening of *A Very British Coup* would be raising these issues in the homes of hundreds of thousands of working-class people (the very audience the left would dearly love to talk to), surely here was an opportunity the left would not hesitate to take advantage of.

Well, hesitate they most certainly did. Apologies for absences must again predominate. Neither *Marxism Today*, *Socialist Review* nor *Tribune* had anything at all to say about the programme. Those journals that did have something to say matched the mainstream press in concentrating on the 'reality' of the programme's scenario. Sawtell stated that the type of socialist government that holds fictional office in the film 'would only be elected in an era of raised class consciousness and class struggle'. This argument was not expanded upon but the implication that there should be more evidence of 'class struggle' in the programme was picked up by *Socialist Worker*. The one thing Ian Taylor found 'utterly missing' in the programme was the working class.

The nearest thing to a worker in the three-hour drama is politician Harry. The only intimation of the working class outside of a meeting with TUC leaders is Harry's memory of his grandad (*Socialist Worker*, 18 June 1988).

In both of these reviews the programme's form is used to leap-frog into a discussion of its content. While politics is discussed within the cultural space of the journals, there is no discussion of the politics of culture itself or the political questions raised by the form as well as, and in relation to, its content.

Much the same thing occurs in *New Statesman & Society*, but there is a significant shift here in that we begin to see cultural products (or rather questions raised by them) being discussed outside of the journal's cultural space – in the editorials and in guest journalists' comments. This 'promotion' from the back pages to the front produced a criticism whose discourse was borrowed almost wholesale from the mainstream press. *A Very British Coup* reworked the 'familiar paranoid fantasies of the left which sees the ruling class conspiring to thwart the will of the British people', claimed the *New Statesman & Society*'s editorial (10 June 1988) in a statement that both echoed the views of mainstream criticism and distanced the magazine from those of the left.

As we move further into the periphery, we find a number of significant and interesting examples of critical commentary.

appearing. Interesting and significant not just in what they say but in where they are saying it Hilary Wainwright wrote in *The Guardian* (8 August 1988) and Ken Livingstone in *The Evening Standard* (27 June 1988). This latter piece was very much a response to Roy Hattersley's article, 'Let's Pretend Politics' (*The Listener*, 23 June 1988) which had totally denounced the programme's politics as 'fantasy as distinct from political thought' Wainwright's, Livingstone's and Hattersley's articles all provoked various letters in response and hence we can begin to detect a limited, but not insignificant, space for discussion and criticism being opened up within the periphery of critical and not so critical journals.

Perhaps what was most lacking in the left's criticism of *A Very British Coup* was any general discussion of the distinct importance of television as a medium and, more specifically, the question of what makes it such a potentially politically effective medium. Hilary Wainwright did begin to raise such questions in stating that truly radical television would have to address the needs of its audience if it was to be able to 'imagine the real messy, [business of socialism]'. Her article was significantly different from most oppositional criticism in that it was directly concerned with 'the kind of television criticism should demand' and as such implied an active link between socialists, critics and programme makers.

On a similar theme, Hugh Hebert produced a very interesting comment concerning the relationship between the form of *A Very British Coup* and its political effectiveness

Over the top, I hear you say, and so it is – splendidly over the top and a moment that will remind you, adrift in the endless hours of pseudo-realism, that the screen does after all have transformative powers (*The Guardian*, 4 July 1988)

Hebert's and Wainwright's articles are encouraging because they begin to deal with their critical objects as a point of intervention within a political debate.

But, despite these glimmers of hope, this survey of the left's response to *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *A Very British Coup* has, on the whole, demonstrated how much the mainstream operates a hegemony in the area of critical discourse The majority of the left's criticism failed to contest certain important divisions and distinctions (for instance, between art and politics, form and content) and hence failed to challenge the politically reactionary effects of such formulations Commentary on form is kept to a minimum and is almost entirely superficial Thus we are told that it is a 'good film', is 'riveting viewing' and has 'excellent acting' but are never told what makes a film 'good', why certain images are 'riveting' or what is 'excellent acting' There is little talk of film as 'film', television as 'television' or of the two forms as different but connected social processes There is only the odd passing comment on what makes a

film or TV programme politically effective, how form and content might combine to produce the politically challenging and provocative programmes that the left would presumably like to see. This absence is all the more surprising given that it is these very questions which have dominated much of Marxist cultural theory over the past thirty years. So why has this critical theory had so little influence in the area of critical practice, why has there been no process of a filtering down of ideas from the 'high ground' of theory to the 'lower ground' of journalism, reviewing and the more quotidian criticism?

We have to look at left criticism in the context of the harsh political climate in which it has had to survive, the resultant lack of opportunities to practice and develop, and the dominance of mainstream criticism and its supporting political ideas. But while all this might explain the quantitative failures of left criticism it does not in itself, explain its qualitative failures. And it certainly does not explain why those spaces of cultural criticism that the left does control – in the 'core' journals – should be so critically and politically inarticulate

To understand this we need to look at the history of cultural theory and criticism in Britain over the last twenty to thirty years. And where better to start than right here in the pages of *Screen*? For it was the early *Screen* journal that most clearly celebrated and promoted the development of film and television studies in Britain, fuelled, in the main, by the theories of Louis Althusser. The rise and fall of Althusserianism and its ultimately debilitating effects on the left have been well documented elsewhere.¹⁰ Suffice to say here that its effects on film and television studies is most evident in the split between 'textualists' and 'contextualists', the former emphasizing textual analysis and the position of the spectator, the latter more concerned with contextual inquiry and the role of the audience. Though sharing many (often unstated) political aims, these two 'tendencies' soon developed separate journals, methods, references and devotees.

During the formative years of cultural studies in Britain 'textualism' was dominant, but the growing disenchantment with its Althusserian paradigm (of which the *Screen*/*Screen Education* division was just one sign) was due largely to the inability of that paradigm to inform a criticism of telling political intervention. The domination of textual analysis produced, at its worst, cultural criticism of a wilfully indigestible form and, even at its best, it soon became clear that text-based analyses yielded only text-based solutions. Theory and practice became absolutely autonomous spheres of influence with the result that left critics and reviewers were unable to develop the critical tools needed to shape a politically effective interventionist theory and practice of film and television criticism. The reviews of *A Very British Coup* and *Distant Voices. Still Lives* have shown how this gap in left criticism was all

¹⁰ See Simon Clarke et al. *One Dimensional Marxism* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980) and Gregory Elliot Althusser *The Detour of Theory* (London: Verso, 1988).

too easily filled by the ideas and discourse of the mainstream.

The sense of political focus that empowered the early *Screen* project has been dissipated. This, coupled with numerous fragmenting experiences endured by the left over the last two decades, has made the prospect of any sort of political focus within the left in general, and in film and television studies in particular, both difficult and remote. Indeed, for many the very idea of attaining a political focus has been discarded in favour of a celebration of fragmentation. But as too many 'left' cultural theorists line up to claim their rightful place in the bin-bags of history, the space they have evacuated should not go unfilled. And there are, of course, numerous ideas and people able to fill that space. Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, whose work I have drawn on extensively here, is not alone in raging against those who celebrate the 'aftermath of modernism'. And, while fighting shy of political commitment, Bourdieu, like many, remains committed to the belief that the point is still not just to interpret, analyse or agonize about the world, but to change it.

And why not? For if left cultural criticism is not about changing the world, in some small but not insignificant way, then what is it about? Is it just to remain an afterthought, a theorization of a practice past, or is it to become a political intervention in a practice still happening? As Mike Poole has said:

. . . what is ultimately at stake is not so much the kind of criticism television [and film] should get as the kind of *television* [and film] criticism should demand. That is the real critical project – and as yet it has hardly begun.¹¹

¹¹ Mike Poole 'The cult of the generalist – British TV criticism 1936–83' *Screen* vol 25 no 2 (1985) p 61

reports

Society for Animation Studies Conference, Carleton University, Ottawa, 5-7 October 1990

Now in its third year of existence, the Society for Animation Studies held its second annual conference in Ottawa, Canada, over the weekend of 5-7 October 1990. The Department of Film Studies at Carleton University hosted the event, which was scheduled to coincide with Ottawa's International Animation Festival. Some eighty people attended the conference, and approximately fifty of those presented papers or participated in panel discussions.

As a film studies academic who has had little prior contact with the animation studies community, I found the SAS Conference notably more open and eclectic than a mainstream academic film studies event. The membership of the SAS (which totalled 113 at the close of the conference) would appear to be dominated by university-based scholars, but it includes significant numbers of working animators, instructors based in art schools, and independent historians or archivists (groups not sufficiently large or independent of purpose to go off and form their own associations). The conference also attracted its share of academic tourists (like myself) whose theoretical or historical interests happened to alight, however briefly, on animated films as an object of investigation.

This variety is clearly one source of the SAS's richness as an organization, but it produced the inevitable collisions of academic language. Those papers rooted most deeply in the theoretical presuppositions of film theory – such as Judy Page's feminist reading of the Pink Panther and Russell George's playful moves between a Chuck Jones cartoon and Lacan's 'Seminar on *The Purlined Letter*' – frequently showed

these procedures of analysis at their most skilfully deployed, but they were greeted, for the most part, with a stony and ungratifying silence. At the same time, highly sophisticated analyses of technological processes from within the history of animation (for example, Martin McNamara's analysis of American multi-plane animation in the 1930s) were unlikely to spark discussion or debate. This discrepancy between the high quality of many presentations and the relative absence of lively interchange characterized many of the panels, and pointed to a high level of fragmentation and specialization within the animation studies community.

The role of national schools within the historical development of animated film has been a significant one, and the SAS programme included several reports from people outside the United States on animation related activity in their respective home countries. Not unexpectedly, this year's conference attracted several people from the Soviet Union and nations which were formerly part of the East Bloc; they spoke, for the most part, on the changing political conditions in their home countries and the implications of these for animated film production. Discussions of Canadian animation naturally included treatments of National Film Board work, but a panel on 'Regionalism' drew attention to production activity in the Prairie and Western provinces, work which is usually overlooked in examinations of Canadian animated film.

Classical US studio animation is a prominent interest within the SAS, and was the focus of several of the most interesting panels at the conference. Some attempts to treat older animated films sociologically (in terms of their representations of race, for example) did not venture beyond the obvious, and suffered from their failure to engage with the methodological and historiographical insights of film or cultural studies in a wider sense. The most

sophisticated and provocative papers on US animation addressed either of two themes central to the conference: one of these was the Fleischer animation studio, and the appropriate ways in which one might make sense of its complex institutional history; the other was the process of canon formation within animation studies as a subdiscipline. In both cases, work undertaken within the study of animation should serve to illuminate related work within the larger field of film studies.

Myron Waldman and Shamus Culhane, animators who had worked at the Fleischer studios in the 1930s and who had been central to the development of many of its better known series (such as Betty Boop and Popeye), were both in attendance at the conference. A Fleischer retrospective was part of the International Animation Festival, and the conference programme itself included a workshop in which Waldman and Culhane answered questions. Despite the poorly disguised animosity between these two, and the tendency for questions of a detailed and factual nature to be answered with digressions (but generally fascinating) anecdotes, the participation of Waldman and Culhane provided one of the great pleasures of the conference.

A more scholarly panel on the Fleischer Studios centred on two key moments in the studio's history: its move from New York to Miami in the mid-1930s; and the assumption of control of the studio by Paramount in the early 1940s. Despite the long-term unwillingness of the Fleischer family (and of Paramount itself) to cooperate with researchers, two of the presenters, Harvey Deneroff and Mark Langer, had each acquired background materials of sufficient detail to reconstruct and interpret these events in depth. In part, the rereading of these events involved challenges to the dominant grids through which they had hitherto been read, which tended to feature the martyrdom of creative talent at the hands

of the Fleischers themselves, on the one hand, and the brutal takeover of the Fleischer studios by ruthless Paramount executives, on the other. Inasmuch as the study of American studio animation continues to be shaped by myths positing a constellation of pioneering, authorial figures, institutional analyses such as these were particularly welcome.

A panel on canon formation seemed appropriate to the field of animation studies at this point in its development, when an accumulated stock of popular histories of animated film has established a corpus of masterpieces and ways of 'narrativizing' their history. If the presentations on this panel lacked a sense of common purpose, they nevertheless mapped out a variety of ways in which the process of canon formation *vis-à-vis* animated film might be investigated. William Mikulak traced the relationship between the emerging, gallery-based market for animation cels and the construction of a canon of 'legitimate' artists and historical schools wherein forms of validation similar to those which surround painting may be observed. David Erlich pointed to the uneasy position of experimental animation within such institutions as the film festival, where it is integrated simultaneously within histories of experimental film and within narratives of the ongoing liberation of animated film from its past as popular cultural form.

As might be expected, the conference – and animation studies more generally – seemed marked by diverging impulses: to consolidate the legitimacy and autonomy of animated film, on the one hand, and, at the same time, to valorize and explore a variety of cinematic forms whose interest lies precisely in their marginality relative to the feature film. A panel dealing with flipbooks and other exoteric media explored ways in which these have offered novel variations on the dominant forms of cinema, while Derek Bousé, in a well-received paper, examined the relationship between live action and

animated wildlife films. Given the growing interest within mainstream film studies, in industrial films, newsreels and other genres that one might term 'paracinematic', the normal perception of animated film as an obscurantist object of study when set alongside the interests of other film scholars seems less and less legitimate.

The conference ended with the Society's annual meeting, at which the membership entertained a proposal to hold its next conference in the Bristol area. Some in attendance expressed misgivings about holding a second consecutive conference outside the United States, given the costs of attendance incurred by a membership which is dominated by Americans, and the proposal was taken under consideration.

Will Straw

Signs of the Times: A Decade of Video, Film and Tape-slide Installations, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 7 October to 9 December 1990; and Electronic Visions, Harris Gallery, Preston, 1 November to 10 December 1990.

Like the question of quality raised by Charlotte Brunsdon in these pages last year ('Problems with quality', *Screen*, vol. 31, no 1, pp 67–90), the question of aesthetics has returned to media debates after some years on the margins. There is a lot to learn, for instance, in the area of apparatus theory. The earliest video installations – associated with names like Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman – made extensive use of time-delay mechanisms, exploiting and altering the instant playback facility of the electronic medium. But this relied on the use of the old open-reel machines. The onward march of technological progress has given us the user-friendly sealed cassette, much more difficult to damage or tamper with – or to intervene in (and to recreate on modern machines)

Such intervention in the hardware has characterized British avant-garde film (especially at the London Filmmakers' Coop) and video installation worlds. David Hall exhibited at MOMA an elegant piece which drew on the lost potentialities of the Nipkow disc, mechanical heart of the early Baird Televisor, 'superseded' and eradicated by a progress which has been synonymous with standardization. In the art world, if not in mainstream media and media theory, the hardware is seldom taken as given.

Video installations are, moreover, tricky things to install. Multi-monitor works like those by Jez Welsh, Stuart Marshall, Susan Hiller and Judith Goddard must, especially in the Oxford retrospective covering a decade of rapid technological change, be affected by contingencies of synchronization, the degree of luminescence and colour response on different screens, mobile spectators and the vagaries of storage for an art form without an institutional archive. This sense of accident is used to good effect by certain artists, for example Chris Meigh-Andrews, whose *Fountain* (1990), shown at the Harris, makes use of the wiring and playback decks as elements of the sculpture itself, punning on the flow of current, images and imaged water. In Jez Welsh's *Forest Fires* (1983–90), the key auditory experience is that of the viewer's feet trampling over woodland debris on the gallery floor; Tina Keane's *Escalator* (1988) invites an almost architectural experience, as you walk through, below, behind and around the multiple screens.

What video art, video sculpture, video installation, video performance return to the moving image is space. Film and television posit, in their dominant forms, the coherence of time and space, prioritizing the diegetic and virtual while eliding the time and place of viewing. But video installation calls the viewer into spatial relationship with the object, a relationship carried over into a sculptural understanding of even single monitor works.

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Video installations are, moreover, tricky things to install. Multi-monitor works like those by Jez Welsh, Stuart Marshall, Susan Hiller and Judith Goddard must, especially in the Oxford retrospective covering a decade of rapid technological change, be affected by contingencies of synchronization, the degree of luminescence and colour response on different screens, mobile spectators and the vagaries of storage for an art form without an institutional archive. This sense of accident is used to good effect by certain artists, for example Chris Meigh-Andrews, whose *Fountain* (1990), shown at the Harris, makes use of the wiring and playback decks as elements of the sculpture itself, punning on the flow of current, images and imaged water. In Jez Welsh's *Forest Fires* (1983–90), the key auditory experience is that of the viewer's feet trampling over woodland debris on the gallery floor; Tina Keane's *Escalator* (1988) invites an almost architectural experience, as you walk through, below, behind and around the multiple screens.

What video art, video sculpture, video installation, video performance return to the moving image is space. Film and television posit, in their dominant forms, the coherence of time and space, prioritizing the diegetic and virtual while eliding the time and place of viewing. But video installation calls the viewer into spatial relationship with the object, a relationship carried over into a sculptural understanding of even single monitor works.

The classic teacher's image of subject positioning in the cinema – the fixed rows of banked seating – is immediately disrupted, along with the domesticity of the domestic TV. The space of normal viewing belongs to the domain of undifferentiated, homogeneous, realist representation: a film is a film, regardless of where it is projected. We need only approach ideal viewing conditions. Place, on the other hand, is a determination of space as a coincidence of event and geography that is itself productive of meaning as if a film were made only to be seen in one place, not another. Place is both a historical residue and a hard-won anchoring of work in 'in-different', postmodern space. In this instance, the instance of video installation, place is not, as Heidegger would have it, the return of the feudal anchor in the ground of feudal loyalties – the family home, the centre of worship, the manorial domain. It is more the return of the materiality of the body to the field of the visible, as that has been remade in the dominant regimes of looking created in cinema and recreated in television.

A discussion event at Oxford covered issues of the traffic between high and popular art forms, problems of archiving and curation, the museumization of video, virtual environment experiments, interactive media, material film and more. Yet the figure that returned constantly was that of the audience. As Stuart Marshall observed pointedly, postmodernism authorizes but has yet to create a new populism. It is the problem of an avant garde in the eighties still without an audience, but now deprived of a viable vanguardist ideology. What was surprising was the feeling that 'we' had to be involved with electronic media: otherwise they would stagnate into the old orthodoxies, the old ideologies.

Contemporary computer graphics and virtual environments (such as the NASA mask-and-glove system) disappoint with their slavish maintenance of monocular

perspective. In the work in both the Preston and Oxford shows, that perceptual centring is constantly challenged. Though single pieces were restrained, the cumulative effect of a group exhibition was to reorganize spatial perception radically. Here were audio spaces that, in certain instances, bled around corners out of sight of their sources; sculptural/architectural spaces around and through which the viewer must travel; virtual spaces of onscreen worlds, visual spaces of Greenbergian flatness, for example in Susan Hiller's well-known *Belshazzar's Feast* (1983–4), where images of flame move towards the purity of pixels (though she also devotes attention to the generation of images and gestalts from the eye itself), geographical spaces, notably in the move of Judith Goddard's environmental sculpture, *Electron* (1987), from Dartmoor indoors. Despite the interchangeability of gallery spaces, anchoring the materiality of the installation in its specific site troubles unthinking acceptance of the virtual spaces of the video monitor (the ideal simulacrum), the internal space of video sculpture as hyperreal, and image space after the demise of the camera as core image-generator. The video sculpture is unquestionably *here*, where the TV set is invisible, cloaked by the light of its images. At stake is the undifferentiated circulation of sameness: the difference asserted in experimental media is an ethical and aesthetic imperative as much as or more than an ideological one.

In discussion, Anne-Marie Duguët outlined a history of the experimental imperative. After an initial modernist interest in the medium as such, there came a shift away from the live or near-live interactive installation, and a closer engagement with the politics of representation. But its characteristics were more at the level of perception than of narrative: peripheral vision; proximity to the image; and massive amplification of sound. Simultaneously, the eighties have witnessed a shift from systems-

oriented work to the capacity of the sensorium to process and transform data – perception as apparatus – a shift towards virtuality and simulation typified by the video work of Thierry Kuntzel.

None of the Oxford work really paralleled this European and American shift, though Marty St James's and Anne Wilson's *Portrait of Shobana Jeyasingh* (1990) shown in the Harris exhibition (a relative of the works on show in early 1991 at the National Portrait Gallery in London) works through many related concerns. The *Portrait* shows the metonymic elements of the body of the South Asian dancer organized across fourteen screens: passionately observed; technically brilliant; and a vivid demonstration of the impossibility of TV flow ever completing even the description of a single human gesture. At the same time, as with so much of the work at Oxford, it evidenced a return to the physicality of the body at the core of aesthetic experience. Scripted, encoded, clothed in the scribble of Western electronic culture, yet the irredeemable flesh remains, not as other but as difference.

Much discussion at Oxford was devoted to the future. For many, the key aspects are the transience of video sculptures and tapes, and the necessity to intervene in the apparatus itself. For others, the central concern is the pursuit of audiences and the dilemmas that brings with it. For me, the issues gelled around place, accident and the body. Both the contingencies surrounding installations and the disequilibrium of material and virtual spaces seem to recentre the body as a zone of action – the body as sensorium as well as ground of representation. This is the site of productive tension in Tina Keane's *Escalator*, poised between corporeality and virtuality, politics and aesthetics. Symbolic and Imaginary in its account of homelessness as actuality and metaphor.

An increasingly ergonomic and therefore telematic society keeps bodies in stasis while eradicating distance electronically. Interactive

media reformulate human interaction, minimalizing difference, maximizing control. Magnetic recording media properties, notably that of erasure, are becoming vital formal characteristics of such media. Contingencies can be wiped from memory, so that narrative closure becomes far more final, for example, than the 'death' of a game persona. The most unsettling vision of this was suggested by Ceryth Wynne Evans, who described the use of virtual worlds to provide environments for people with disabilities, and questioned the relation of such erasable virtualities to the suffering body. With the body, we return to an ethical dimension of the aesthetic. Electronic arts, still in their pioneer phase, risk *dépassé avant-gardisme* in order to intervene in hardware, form, technique, design and spectatorship. It is worth noting that industry sponsors are significant contributors to such experimental work: the audience may be small, but it may also be crucial.

Sean Cubitt

MIPCOM '90: Us and Them; an outsider's view

US is a very small production outfit that produces – on a shoestring – one of the UK's most successful 'youth' music shows: *SNUB TV*. The basic premise of the show is that music programming, by and large, patronizes the audience and seems to be made by people who stopped actually being interested in music, especially new and underground forms, long ago – TV people. We think we do it better.

SNUB is brash, adventurous and seriously underfunded. We have a choice: either accept a UK transmission fee only from the BBC (in lieu of the usual Channel Four model of a full commission) or not make the programmes. When the offer first came up we'd had an even lower-budget series go out on a national US cable network but, apart

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from that critically-lauded effort, no TV experience. It's always hard to break into TV, but, these days, there's no getting over the fact that the recession has hit TV production, and it's even worse post the SKY takeover. Outsiders – forget it.

We often feel like one of the black sheep of the independent sector – accepting a licence fee puts you in the not-serious programme makers' league. But we were convinced we could make the series without the need to accept a 'marriage-offer' – another favoured Channel Four model – which would mean an established production company would absorb us and our ideas and take the commission. We could become researchers on our own programme – hey what a great idea! We watched with horror that precise scenario unfold when Zenith was wheeled in by Channel Four to 'coproduce' *Big World Cafe* with Vivien Goldman's company, Spellbound. Vivien's good idea became a big-budget shambles, and Spellbound seemed to be eased out of the second series. Thanks but no-thanks, we'd rather make the programme we want to, despite the horrendous budget problems. The great thing about only having a licence fee is that you do retain complete editorial control and all the rights. This is where the THEM comes in.

The obvious way to raise additional programme finance is to exploit those precious overseas rights. Before the first series went out we got ourselves an established and admired distributor and waited for the programme sales cash to roll in. Another problem – SNUB tends to favour those artists and musics that are not, by and large, commercially successful. Not because we adhere to some outdated idea that to be commercial is to be tainted and somehow of no interest, but we felt we were redressing an imbalance. No way do the charts tell the whole story – the new underground is of much more interest and relevance. We were there not to service the latest release plans of

the record companies but to represent a submerged but vastly influential music culture.

However this made naming names to sell the programme a little difficult – no big stars, no even moderately famous ones. We did get some sales, but actually it felt like we were giving the series away. There are a few examples of maverick programmes (like *Rapido*) selling themselves, so, encouraged, we decided we had not too much to lose (more money . . .): we should check out the world's biggest film and TV market, MIPCOM.

I don't know what MIPCOM stands for. It's one of a whole plague of M-words though: MIP-TV, MIDEM and no doubt others. They are all run by one company, The Midem Organisation (or International Exhibition Organisation), that specializes in entertainment industry get-togethers of a massively corporate nature. There seems to be a market for every month in the TV and film industry, but the two MIPs are the biggest.

MIPCOM and sister event MIP-TV are unwieldy events, attracting over five thousand registrants and hundreds of exhibitors. They all take place in a huge modernist bunker on the sea front of the ultimate business watering hole, Cannes. In the lead-up to MIPCOM, the tele-trade papers were full of dire warnings of the perils of MIPCOM for small independents – astronomical costs loomed as the principal concern. With costs around £700 per company for registration, before any promotional literature, accommodation, flights and living expenses, you can see the problem. Consider an ad in the various publications that swamp the event or, more expense, renting an exhibition space (or, as many companies did, hiring a yacht moored to a pier just by the festival building), and you're obviously talking serious investment

Beyond SNUB's limited budget for sure. Getting there, getting in, and expenses, that's as much as we could manage.

In previous years the British Independent Programme Producers Association had taken a stand and we were initially distressed to find that this was not to be the case in 1990 – a decision based on the exorbitant cost (they will retain a stand at MIP-TV). It would have given us a base at least to operate from, a place where we could be contacted, and where we might even meet some of our fellow producers. We made the decision to go despite the lack of an organized UK presence – we are on-air with a new series running from January to March 1991 and we wanted to make contacts before then, rather than wait for MIP-TV to come around in April. But if you have to choose one market and you're producing for or looking to sell to TV, then MIP-TV is probably the better place. (That's hearsay, because we haven't attended MIP-TV ourselves.) IPPA advised us, too late to our frustration, to contact a Euro-organization, called EUROAIM which is an EEC-funded umbrella for smallish independent producers. EUROAIM provides subsidized back-up, from cheaper registrations and exhibition space to organized meetings with buyers from various Euro-broadcasters. More of them later.

MIP is basically a place where the big guys parade their wares. Most everybody who's anybody is there to sell. But where there are sellers there are buyers, and it was this latter rare species we had set our sights on.

Market is the key word. Most activity seems to centre on the exhibition space, the Palais de Festival, where on six floors exhibitors display their goods. It's a bizarre bazaar. You appear to be in some sort of surreal shopping mall, with the world's TV laid out for purchase: you almost feel like you should have a shopping trolley, to wheel up and down the aisles. You can pass, in a short tour, the BBC, LWT, Granada, Central and a host of other UK broadcasters,

Berlusconi, Freemantle/Talbot ('The World's Biggest Supplier of Game Shows', according to the slogan adorning their massive exhibition space), a bewildering array of Euro-broadcasters, MTV (USA) and literally hundreds of producers of everything from serious arts/documentary programmes to kids' animation, producers of 'erotic' material, light entertainment and cult films. The lower the floor the more frenetic the activity seemed to be – like some sort of descent into Hades.

It does all appear remarkably accessible on first impressions. Pay the admission and you're in, with access to the lot. Though like all market-place democracy, you do have the feeling that what you're actually seeing is an impressive piece of set-building, that the real action lies below the surface, in some place where entry is rather more restricted. Both observations are right. You can make connections or deals on the floor, but you know that it's over that expense-account lunch, or in the private suite, the yacht, that real money is changing hands.

A problem we were already – to our distress – aware of, became more apparent in the course of our stay at MIP. Music TV is by and large at the bottom of the heap when it comes to programme sales. In fact in the MIPCOM Directory – a tome of some thousand pages – music is listed as either 'Music programmes: classical or jazz', but definitely not pop; or 'Music video/magazine'. We fit into the latter category in these terms, but not in our own. The problem is that with the advent of the 'promo' clip and the likes of MTV producing vast amounts of programming built around it, pop programming has become synonymous with music video, and no-one is going to pay you a lot of money for that, even if your programme (like ours) originates its own material. MTV and the advent of satellite – so much of which relies on cheap pop programming – also signals for many countries the Americanization of youth

culture, and one way to indicate national resistance is to originate your own music television – which they all do these days. This is not to say music programming doesn't attract money – it does – but money tends to congregate around the celebrity-strewn rock extravaganza, which is not our line at all. Though if we did follow the dictates of the market-place, that's where we'd be heading, fast.

MIPCOM takes place over five days – though not being exhibitors with all the setting-up and taking-down of displays (video-screens, logos, stylish furniture, programme brochures, all *de rigueur*) – we opted for just three days. In that time we managed to talk to many broadcasters, primarily European (which reflects where we see our main market potential and the fact that MIPCOM did seem to have greater numbers of European broadcasters than from any other significant territory). We didn't make a sale, though we did make contacts that wouldn't have been available to us otherwise.

Ironically, some of the breakthroughs we made were with others from the UK market. We met, for instance, in one or other of the hotel bars that attract delegates of an evening, two commissioning editors we could spend months trying to reach back in London, the assembled ranks of the UK media (usually bemoaning the lack of good gossip pieces) and various other useful types who, post-event, look like providing some unexpected sales and coproduction outlets. I suspect that has to do with having a basis on which to talk. The subterranean world of the behind-the-scenes television power-brokers gets to meet up at these events. Going along as a small independent with just a few programmes to your name does render you relatively powerless.

But the other thing of value that we came away with – much harder to define – was the

beginning of an understanding of who's out there: who your market might be, what they are looking for; and how you might approach them. This, we felt, was particularly true of the Europeans we met. Next time we will have a basis on which to request a meeting, in advance – trying to arrange meetings on the spot becomes a nightmare of negotiating other prescheduled appointments.

Now, having checked out the way EUROAIM functions, we may decide to go as part of their umbrella. If you are trying to sell programmes, there is no doubt that it's useful to have somewhere to screen excerpts at least. And we were hard to contact – access to exhibition space means you can be found. I did hear some buyers indicate that the EUROAIM scheme made it easy to avoid, en masse, many troublesome independents, as they were all grouped conveniently together, but I trust this was a minority position!

Lastly, one other strange bit of feedback we had after attending was that our presence was seen to indicate our 'seriousness' as a production company – some sort of trial by ordeal. If you invest the time and money to project your programmes and ideas then you must be planning longevity, indicating staying power.

We do intend to get along to MIP-TV next April, so obviously we found the event of use. In fact everybody at MIP complains about it, but they'll all be at the next one. For anyone who has a programme with potential outside their own country, who wants to have a look around the industry for themselves and is interested in the television process (in all its manifestations), I'd say go, even if it's only just the once. You might make sales, you'll certainly make contacts and it probably won't put you off the world of TV forever.

Brenda Kelly

reviews

review:

Giampiero Brunetta, *Buio in sala: cent'anni di passioni dello spettatore cinematografico*. Venezia: Marsilio, 1989, 404 pp.

GIULIANA BRUNO

Buio in sala. cent'anni di passioni dello spettatore cinematografico (Darkness in the movie theatre one hundred years of the film spectator's passions) is the latest book by the Italian film historian Giampiero Brunetta. A professor at the University of Padua, Brunetta is a prolific scholar, well known for his seminal work on Italian film history

In order to place the book in its cultural context, a brief overview of Brunetta's work prior to *Buio in sala* may be useful to the English-speaking reader. Brunetta's publication history goes back to 1969, with *Umberto Barbaro e l'idea di neorealismo*, a book on an important Italian marxist critic and the notion of neorealism. This was followed by *Forma e parola nel cinema* (1970), an analysis of the rhetoric of film language, centred on three case studies: silent cinema and the films of Antonioni and Pasolini. A book on Hitchcock, *Hitchcock o l'universo della relatività* (1971), was followed by a number of works on Italian cinema, particularly in the fascist era, on the relation of literature to film, and on narratology. These include: *Intellettuali, cinema e propaganda tra le due guerre* (1972), *Nascita del racconto cinematografico* (1974); *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre* (1975), *Letteratura e cinema* (1976), and *Cinema perduto* (1981).

Brunetta's two-volume *Storia del cinema italiano* (1979, 1982), a fifteen hundred-page history of Italian cinema from 1895 to the present, has radically changed the state of research on Italian film culture, offering scholars a fundamental reference point. This wide-ranging cultural history includes areas of inquiry such as film criticism and theory, intellectuals and the cinema, censorship,

institutional and cultural policies, genre and authorial studies, and economic analyses, as well as textual and semiotic case studies. The comprehensive bibliography and filmography offer an invaluable tool for further research. This book is among the very few Italian scholarly texts to see an English translation: it is to be published by Princeton University Press around 1994.

Long interested in the popular imaginary as expressed in and through film spectatorship, Brunetta had been working on a book on the subject when an unexpected event provided an impetus to complete the project – and perhaps to change its very nature: the filmmaker Ettore Scola invited Brunetta to collaborate with him on a film about spectatorship. Imagine Woody Allen making *The Purple Rose of Cairo* in collaboration with Mary Ann Doane: what would be the consequences for the subsequent work of both? In this case, Scola made *Splendor* (1988) and Brunetta completed *Buo in sala* in a productive climate of cultural exchange. The book was published shortly after the release of a group of films, all set in movie houses and all dealing with the spectatorial experience: *Splendor*, the Academy Award-winning *Cinema Paradiso* (Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988) and *Via Paradiso* (Luciano Odorisio, 1988). A fourth film, *Fulgor*, to be directed by Federico Fellini, was planned but never realized, possibly because of the overload of films about spectatorship. Not unlike the others, Fellini's film was to follow the history of a small movie theatre, the Fulgor cinema, in which a generation of Italian spectators watched Hollywood films during the fascist era.

As a cultural phenomenon reviving spectatorship, Brunetta's book and the three films appear to share a point of view: in all of them, the cinema is regarded as a site of dynamic collective energy, and also as a space of memory, both individual and historical. Spectatorship is conceived primarily in sociocultural terms, in that the social context is emphasized, and a privileged status given to the popular component of the spectatorial body. The problem with this view, though – and Brunetta acknowledges it – is that it can easily slide into nostalgia for a lost era of popular film viewing: the very titles of the films associate 'paradise' and 'splendour' with (popular) film spectatorship. This position may lead to a mythologizing of cinema as a final bastion of collective life, to constructing film spectatorship as the last symbol of a dying popular culture. The fact is that in Italy cinemas have been closing, and film spectatorship is declining and changing in its patterns and forms. As *homo cinematographicus* and his/her space continue to evolve, the old model is becoming a cultural icon.

While it is a logical continuation of Brunetta's substantive work and interests, *Buo in sala* constitutes a point of departure in terms of its form: one senses a change in the direction of the author's research. New passions (a key word in both title and text) and a

new type of language inhabit a writing which exposes the erosion of historiography's grand master-plot. Aphorisms and citations constitute the bulk of the writing. Though still scholarly, the book deliberately eschews footnotes. Rather, constructed as a collage, it incorporates a myriad of quotes within the body of the text. It is made up of various fragments, excerpts, signs and traces, memories, oral testimonies, fictions, poetry, letters, films, songs, essays, historical documents, statements and interviews. The 'scene of writing' is a kind of cultural dictionary, a puzzle, a map

By no means a unique case, *Buio in sala* exemplifies a trend in various areas of Italian cultural life. Brunetta's attitude *vis-à-vis* the representation of history parallels recent work in the field of theory by semiotician Emilio Garroni and philosopher Aldo Gargani: all signal the disintegration of scientific thought in favour of a more personal discourse that slides toward intellectual autobiography. A biography, and perhaps an autobiography, of spectatorship emerges from the network of microtexts of *Buio in sala* in fact, Italo Calvino's 'Autobiografia di uno spettatore'¹ is taken as an emblematic point of reference

¹ Italo Calvino 'Autobiografia di uno spettatore', in Federico Fellini *Quattro film* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974)

Among Brunetta's sources for this collective cultural (auto) biography are citations from such novelists as Marcel Proust, Marguerite Duras, Leo Tolstoy, Thomas Mann, Marguerite Yourcenar, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Arthur Schnitzler, Joseph Roth, Luigi Pirandello, from such theorists as Jean-Paul Sartre, Umberto Eco, Sigmund Freud and Walter Benjamin; from such filmmakers as Fellini, Pasolini, Truffaut, Chaplin: the constellation of citations privileges literary references regarding the spectatorial experience over scholarly texts on spectatorship.

The author defines his model as a 'myriorama' – a term first used in English literature in 1824 to describe a picture composed of a number of parts capable of combining in various ways to create different scenes. The thrust of this writing strategy is to produce a collective spectatorial *chanson de geste*: Brunetta makes a point of not presenting a thesis or following the structure of an argument. Rather than linear argumentation, the book pursues a purely fictional drive. Since spectatorial passion for/in cinema is at stake, a passionate fictional rhetoric is employed.

Spectatorship is conceived as multifaceted: the spectatorial phenomena accounted for by Brunetta include the space of the theatre, names given to cinemas in different cultures and historical moments, and the nature of film titles and their public display. Cinema employees are also included within the spectatorial field. Here, Brunetta cites a fascinating text produced by RKO in 1937, an instruction manual given to all who worked in their movie theatres. Relations between spectators/clients and staff are carefully considered, and various rules established. We learn, for example, that members of staff of movie theatres should consider themselves

'sellers of happiness', the 'live incarnation of the myth of Cinderella'; that they should never watch the movies screened at the theatre, and that if a spectator complains about a film, the response should be 'I am sorry you did not like the film. The majority of critics gave it good reviews'.

Buio in sala inhabits a network of histories, lays out the pages of a spectatorial diary. A historical chronology guides the reader through a grand spectatorial panorama. The book follows the phenomenon of film spectatorship from its origins through to its projected future, from *Fiat Lumière* to a hypothetical 4989, when spectatorship has become archaeology. It reports the cinematic experiences of many intellectuals, artists and writers, experiences which form a picture of cinema in the intellectual life of the twentieth century. Brunetta's archaeological passion leads him to look beyond the obvious or well-known texts. For example, on the early supporters of cinema, he cites a 1916 text by Antonio Gramsci:

They say that cinema is killing the theatre. They say that in Turin the theatrical firms have kept their houses closed during the summer months because the public is deserting the theatre and thronging the cinemas . . . The cinema offers exactly the same sensations as the popular theatre, but under better conditions. . . The film is incontrovertibly superior to the stage.²

Reading through the fragmentary intertext of primary and secondary sources offered in *Buio in sala*, the movie theatre emerges as the ultimate *luogo comune* of the twentieth century – a communal place, a commonplace in the social vocabulary, an everyday experience for all classes in society. It contains the personal and the cultural biographies of its audience, providing a setting for their trajectories and developments. The movie house embodies a microhistory, symbolizes a social microcosm and its popular imaginary.

The quintessential meeting place, where libidinal energies are concentrated, the movie theatre provides a setting for emotional initiation rites, a terrain for the growth of a sentimental and cultural cosmology. In his collage of texts, Brunetta makes a point of associating the movie house with the *Bildungsroman*. Ultimately, the experience of spectatorship participates in, and substitutes for, the function of the *Bildungsroman*. In particular, the popular movie theatre is viewed as this century's school of life, assuming the cultural role of a sentimental education.

Brunetta represents the space of the cinema as a system of forces, a network of external and internal spaces. Spectatorship is, literally and figuratively, a topology. The architecture of a cinema's interior includes several dimensions: the movie house produces a synaesthesia of spaces. Aside from the visual space of spectatorship, Brunetta's collage of spectatorial experience embraces cinema's

2 Antonio Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale* (Turin: Einaudi, 1954), p. 248, cited in *Buio in sala*, p. 22. Translation from Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), pp. 54–5.

proxemic space, tactile and thermal space – spectators’ physical contacts with others—olfactory space, aural space. As a critic wrote in 1897:

During the film spectacle in the darkness, the noises of the public followed one another with gay frequency. The absence of light generates surprising vocal audacities. Sometimes it was like being in a farmyard ³

³ From *Veneto* Padua 2 May 1897 cited in *Buto in sala* p. 73

If Brunetta’s text offers valuable suggestions for constructing an alternative to theoretical models of spectatorship which reify the spectator as transcendental subject, it does present its own, inevitable, risks. At times his ‘spectatorphilia’ risks constructing spectatorship as a totalizing space, a comprehensive or unique site of passions, a space where most human experiences may be lived, condensed, represented, symbolized, or passed through. The cinema becomes at once cradle, school, home, bed, book, battlefield, emotional desert. Although historical experiences of spectatorship are carefully defined, and historical spectators described in their specificity, one ultimately senses a desire to establish an all-encompassing spectatorial universe

This includes the female spectator Brunetta acknowledges the importance of the female public in the history of cinema, giving space to an account of women’s experiences of cinema: there is no question that the spectator of *Buto in sala* is an historical subject, and that so too is the female spectator. However, despite the insistence on historical specificity and on fragmentation – expressed in both the form and the content of the book – spectatorship is constructed in the end as an all-embracing and singular entity, an all-fulfilling psycho-cardio-sexo-cosmology. Spectators, diverse and historically defined though they may be, nonetheless respond in unison to filmic stimuli, participating in a single collective movement and rhythm

One of the subtexts of *Buto in sala* is a disagreement with the theories of spectatorship in Christian Metz’s ‘Imaginary signifier’. Confronting the two positions – Brunetta’s and Metz’s – we find that the spectator is constructed as a different persona in each case. Brunetta and Metz diverge on the question of the physicality of spectatorial space: they have in mind different physical notions of spectatorship and distinct architectural models of the movie house. Brunetta’s spectator is a collective subject, a figure who, through visible dynamics and patterns, transforms him/herself in a crowd, whereas Metz’s spectator is a more isolated unit, a figure divorced from the idea and the experience of the public, for whom ‘the public’ is an element of disturbance. For Brunetta, the ideal place is probably the (defunct) old popular movie house of an Italian small town. In contrast, Metz’s ideal of cinema would perhaps be the (also defunct) Invisible Cinema at 425 Lafayette Street in New York City,

or a cinemathèque, or possibly the Centre Pompidou's Garance. Quite distinct cultural and microhistorical settings shape these two views. Brunetta's model is ultimately that of a *piazza* turned cinema – a very Italian topos, perhaps abused but nonetheless clearly represented in the recent Italian films about spectatorship. Founded on a physical/emotional experience of collectivity, this image of spectatorship requires a precise architectural topos – one governed by the public sphere.

review:

Jacques Aumont, *L'Oeil interminable: cinéma et peinture*. Paris: Editions Séguier, 1989, 279 pp.

ALAN WILLIAMS

Despite what seem like repeated efforts to have done with the matter, we have not finished dealing with André Bazin. Or rather, French cinema scholars continue to grapple with the Bazinian heritage, giving it continuing relevance to an Anglo-American film culture which has not on the whole paid much sustained attention to the most influential of the previous generation of French critics, theoreticians, and historians. This is arguably a notable gap in current attempts to rethink the study of cinema, made all the more difficult to correct because of the status of Bazin's writings in English. Hugh Gray's decades-old translations are very free, rewording and occasionally rethinking the originals in terms of a general Anglo-American (liberal, humanist) readership which no longer exists. The essays in French are notably easier to read and their arguments easier to follow than are their simplified and occasionally censored (of directly religious vocabulary) translations.

Consideration of Bazin in the last two decades has been largely centred on his theoretical arguments. Most recent film theory is simultaneously anti-Bazin (attempting to replace 'idealism' with 'materialism') and covertly in his debt (the critique of the 'ideological effects' of the apparatus as an extension of the Bazinian critique of editing). Jacques Aumont's new book, *L'Oeil interminable*, may be seen as redirecting attention away from Bazin the 'theorist' (in the strict sense, an only marginally appropriate label), and towards the aesthetician and historian. The work critiques and extends Bazin's arguments about cinema and painting, cinema and theatre, and the general question of the relations between film and other media (*cinéma impur*, or 'mixed cinema')

But this project will not necessarily be evident to readers unfamiliar with the intellectual weight of the Bazinian heritage in France, for Aumont leaves it largely implicit – apart from a few scattered remarks, as for example this brief aside in the very middle (almost to the page) of the text Aumont is ‘concerned to “put back on its feet” Bazinian philosophy’. (p 129)

One of the quarrels that the generation of French scholars that followed him had with Bazin was that his persistent attempts at totalization led him to cast his intellectual nets very wide, linking reflections on cinema with questions of theology, speculative psychology, the histories and aesthetic problems of other media, and so on Christian Metz and his contemporaries saw their responsibilities as much narrower, centring on specifically cinematographic or filmic problems (though the older, wider reflections often entered such discussions covertly, through uninterrogated presuppositions) Aumont unashamedly returns to the kind of intellectual breadth that recent academic, ‘scientific’ studies have mainly eschewed—though not completely his extensive bibliography lists no works on philosophy or theology (nor on psychoanalysis or Marxism, for that matter) His film examples range from Lumière and other ‘primitives’ through ‘classic’ silent and sound features, to Godard and others on the margins of narrative cinema His numerous (perhaps *too* numerous) and extensive references to other scholarly works include considerations of Jean-Louis Baudry, Marcelin Pleynet, and other recent French scholars; but also E. H. Gombrich, Susanne Langer, Rudolf Arnheim, Dudley Andrew, David Bordwell, Wolfgang Schivelbusch (on trains), James Gibson (on visual perception), and a veritable host of writers on the history of European painting

Aumont’s arguments are wide-ranging and carefully nuanced, which makes them all but impossible to summarize in a brief review It is both to his credit and his disadvantage that his writing lacks the brutal simplicity and directness (both often somewhat illusory) of Bazin’s essays Although the book’s subtitle is *Cinema and Painting*, it is really about the cinema and many other media, with painting getting special attention In Aumont’s view, for example, one of the principal points of contact between cinema and painting is that both work through a certain *theatricality* As this notion readily demonstrates, he is not concerned with all cinema and all painting though ‘experimental’ film and ‘abstract’ art are frequent points of reference, this book is fundamentally about commercial narrative film (and the ‘art cinema’ on its fringes) and representational painting (mainly of the nineteenth century)

Aumont does not feel obliged to offer an account of all of the various possibilities of the two media because his project is fundamentally historical – or rather, it attempts to historicize key theoretical notions about cinema, painting, and other media. Along

with Bazin, the other intellectual force covertly dominating these pages is post-1968 Anglo-French film theory, from Metz, Baudry, et al to Stephen Heath and his contemporaries. If, for Aumont, Bazin is to be 'put back on his feet', most of contemporary cinema theory is to be radically recast, by purging it of ahistoricity and – presumably, though he does not say so – essentialism. (A small but symptomatic detail: the words *matérialiste* and *matérialisme*, when they appear, are invariably placed in quotation marks.) This is perhaps most clearly seen in his commentary on the *dispositif* of cinema, its 'setup' or arrangement as spectacle. Aumont argues that the setup of the cinematic show is in fact much more variable and difficult to define than the *dispositif* of painting, though this is not his main point. As analyzed by Baudry and other recent theoreticians, the *dispositif* of cinema intrinsically – and fatally – calls forth a certain kind of isolated, self-sufficient subject position, dominated by 'bourgeois ideology'. Aumont replies that 'the "all-seeing" subject, long recognized as the subject of cinema, is a *dated* subject, historically dated by modernity . . . its [nature is] anything but "technical" . . .'. (p. 56)

And if the subject of cinema is historically, not technologically, determined, then it can not only appear at a certain point in time – as one manifestation of what Aumont terms the 'mutable eye', or the 'mobilization of the glance' – it can also disappear at a later point in time. This is exactly what Aumont argues has happened in the past few decades, and it appears, in his view, to have coincided with the mass diffusion of television – though exactly why this has been the case is one of the few major points of his argument not carefully explained. (One worries, here and occasionally elsewhere, about Aumont's slipping into his own form of ahistorical, technologically determinist, thinking.) The subject of cinema initially conformed and adapted itself to the demands of an *oeil variable*, or 'mutable eye', which had previously manifested itself in painting and later in photography. 'At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the centre of gravity [in painting] became displaced, from the object or the scene depicted to the glance [*regard*] directed at them, then to the bearer of this glance, the spectator . . . At the same time, textual mediation disappeared: the painting attempts to be revelation, dazzlement, communion – at the very least, complicity. Convoled, interpellated through all his/her characteristics and by all means – including . . . framing and mise-en-scene – the spectator is finally recognized as seeing subject'. (pp. 51–2)

The book is bracketed by chapters on two filmmakers, Louis Lumière and Jean-Luc Godard. Lumière is examined by interrogating the hoary formula of the pioneer filmmaker as 'the last impressionist painter'. Godard becomes the occasion for a meditation on contemporary cinema's difficulties in the light of the slow dissolution of the *oeil variable*; he may well be 'the next-to-last

[film] artist', as the subtitle of Chapter Eight would have it. In between, after a historical commentary on the mutable eye, there are chapters on cinematic and painterly time, on framing, theatricality, light and colour, and on filmic expressivity. Even readers disturbed by Aumont's vaguely apocalyptic pronouncements about the immanent end-of-cinema-as-we-have-known-it will nonetheless find material of great interest in these central chapters. Particularly provocative are his comments on filmic expressivity and on cinematic Expressionism – which, he argues, is a critical concept of quite recent date, arising out of reaction to Bazinian precepts as promulgated by *Cahiers du cinéma* (Unsurprising, therefore, that he is tempted to doubt that an Expressionist cinema really existed.) Though many films appear to express emotions that exceed their content and which appear to reside in their form, he argues that this is an illusion, that form may mobilize expressivity only through the mediation of an extracinematic, extrafilmic and historically determined subject. Though actualized and motivated by form, expressivity does not reside in it.

Aumont's book has the great merit of treating topics essential to almost any serious attempt to historicize the examination of narrative cinema. His particular orientation – which seems to be neo-Bazinian with a certain debt to American cognitive approaches such as that of David Bordwell – may not appeal to readers more sympathetic than he to post-1968 cinema theory, but they would be well advised to read the book nonetheless and formulate their own responses to the stimulating questions he examines.

review:

Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. London: Athlone Press/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 250 pp.

Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. London: Athlone Press/Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 344 pp.

PAUL PATTON

Deleuze's two-volume study of cinema is a unique event. He writes, as a philosopher, 'about' the cinema, but in such a way that each of these terms implies a question. what does it mean to philosophize? what is the cinema? and what is the nature of this 'aboutness'? There is a traditional conception of philosophy's relation to its objects which parallels the concept of aboutness which rules representational painting. the objects are given outside the artist's work, which then tries to recreate as nearly as possible the essential features of its appearance. After the advent of cinema and the development of abstract artforms, no such rule can be relied upon to tell us what a work of art is about, nor what relation it has to its object, supposing it has one

Deleuze is the philosophical equivalent of a modern artist for whom modernity, as he once wrote, is defined by the power of the simulacrum. Philosophy as he understands and practises it is not simply the formulation of concepts which can adequately represent to a preconstituted subject the features of a pre-existing world, but the invention of concepts which create their own world. Concepts are no longer the subjective images of an objective reality, but realities in their own right, which may or may not interfere with other realities. Deleuzian philosophy is more like a virtual reality system than a painting: by means of such a system an operator, which may or may not be human, can perceive an entirely artificial

world, which may or may not be indiscernable from the real one

As a result, the sense in which these books are 'about' cinema is far from straightforward. They are not an impartial or disinterested theory of cinema, but a thoroughly partial and interested account of its nature and historical development. The aim is not to produce an image of the world, but an assemblage of concepts which can produce effects in other worlds: in this case, the worlds of philosophy, film theory and even filmmaking itself. Deleuze's analyses include reference to technical aspects of particular shots and techniques of montage employed by some of the great auteurs. He also engages critically with attempts to theorize film on the basis of psychoanalysis or linguistics. Resistance to the reduction of the cinematic sign to an element of language provides a constant subplot throughout these books. For this purpose, Deleuze makes use of C. S. Peirce's classification of signs precisely because Peirce's semiotics was not founded upon a linguistic model.

A range of philosophers provide Deleuze with elements for the conceptual apparatus deployed across these pages. Kant, for example, when French and German expressionism are described as a cinema of the sublime. Nietzsche also figures prominently, notably in *Cinema 2*, Chapter six, 'The powers of the false', where a case is made for the spontaneous but profound Nietzscheanism of Orson Welles's films. Deleuze interweaves an extraordinarily concise summary of Nietzsche's condemnation of moral judgement and its connection to the will to truth with an account of Welles's refusal of both the form of judgement and the form of narrative which purports to represent the truth. However, the primary philosophical world which Deleuze brings to bear on cinema is the world of image-matter invented by Henri Bergson: the world as assemblage of movement-images, not images of something, but images in the flow of time. Bergson hoped to produce a philosophy which would be adequate to the world of modern science, but never managed to achieve a successful encounter with physics. Despite this failure, and contrary to Bergson's own attitude towards cinema, Deleuze argues that he provides us with the concepts necessary to understand it: the cinema is profoundly Bergsonian by nature (*Cinema 1*, p. 206).

The interest which then underpins Deleuze's account of cinema is that of showing the ways in which it manages to realize this Bergsonian essence, to show us the 'reality' of duration or time. Deleuze's account of matter as image or movement presents us with a world not unlike other Deleuzian worlds, such as the Nietzschean world of will-to-power delineated in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, or the world of radical difference in *Différence et répétition*. This is a world in which the closed systems of power and subjectivity are derivative phenomena. Ultimately, it is an a-centred universe in which everything reacts upon everything else, 'a world of universal variation, of universal undulation . . .' (*Cinema 1*, p. 58). Cinema

therefore becomes what it essentially is only when it reaches the plane of consistency on which images are in a state of continuous variation, when it is able directly to represent the open-ended and creative flow of events in time, and to show in what happens 'that part of inexhaustible possibility that constitutes the unbearable, the intolerable, the visionary's part' (*Cinema 2*, p. 19).

The cinema depicted in Deleuze's work is not the cinema we know from experience or from our acquaintance with prior texts of film theory. Given his chosen theoretical tools, Deleuze sets out to forge a new concept altogether. What is a film? A succession of images or, as they used to be called, moving pictures. The crucial innovation of cinema with respect to the visual arts hitherto lay in the invention of a new type of image which includes movement. 'In short, cinema does not give us an image to which movement is added, it immediately gives us a movement-image' (*Cinema 1*, p. 2). Deleuze's primary thesis with regard to the nature of cinema is that, in essence and from the outset, films involved the fabrication of movement-images. What this means, however, depends upon what we understand by movement. According to Bergson, movement has two aspects. First, it may be understood in terms of the manner in which bodies undergo changes in position or state. In this sense, movement belongs to relatively closed systems, to actions or events which may be complete as well as discrete. Second, and more profoundly, movement involves qualitative change in reality as a whole, the kind of incorporeal or spiritual change which may accompany a completed event and which profoundly affects the nature of the whole. As an example, consider the assassination of a political leader. In itself, this involves a discrete and relatively closed set of events, corresponding to the first aspect of movement. At the same time, however, the world has changed: it has become a world without that particular focus of individual hopes and political energies. Its future possibilities have altered. At this level, movement in its second aspect touches upon the fundamental nature of time or duration according to Bergson.

Deleuze's argument is that the basic constituents of film, the frame and the shot, combine to produce movement in its first aspect, while the assemblage of these elements in completed films, via the techniques of montage, allows the indirect expression of the underlying qualitative change which corresponds to Bergsonian time or duration. 'Between the beginning and the end of a film something changes, something has changed. But this whole which changes, this time or duration only seems to be capable of being apprehended indirectly in relation to the movement-images which express it' (*Cinema 1*, p. 29). The simplest case, and the one which still dominates the mass of cinematic production, is that of the action-image where characters respond to a perceived situation in such a way that the situation is modified: the danger averted, the conflict

resolved, or the goal attained. Much of Deleuze's classificatory enterprise in *Cinema 1* is taken up with the specification of different kinds of movement-image and their exemplification in particular films and schools of filmmaking: the perception-image, as this was developed in prewar French and German cinema; the affection-image with its privileged relation to the closeup and to the face (Bergman); and the different kinds of action-image, as represented in the Western and other genres of Hollywood film, or in the work of Kurosawa and Mizoguchi.

An historical thesis concerning the difference between prewar and postwar cinema divides the two volumes of Deleuze's study. Before Italian neorealism, cinema was largely dominated by the movement-image. Thereafter, perception, affect and action became dissociated. Even though realist and action films continued to be made, the soul of the cinema lay elsewhere. The possibility of a direct time-image emerges and is actualized in films by Welles, Resnais, and Hitchcock. In fact, this claim that the classical cinema was a cinema of the movement-image is only the most visible surface of a more profound argument concerning the bases of such films. Deleuze argues that classical films tended to fall into one or other of three broad types, depending upon whether perception-images, affection-images or action-images predominated. Despite Deleuze's admiration for English empiricism; these types of movement-image are not arrived at by induction from examples, but deduced from the Bergsonian concept of the movement-image. As with Marx, the concrete is a 'concrete of many determinations'.

Within a Bergsonian world, living beings of any complexity may be characterized as points at which there is a degree of indetermination in the possible responses to the action of other bodies. This indetermination results from the differentiation among capacities for interaction with the world, in particular their separation into distinct operations of perception, action and affection. This conception of living beings implies a thoroughly materialist view of the 'freedom' possessed by such 'centres of indetermination', but it also implies that behind cinema's subordination to the various types of movement-image lay an orientation towards the essential operations of subjectivity: perception, affection and action. In this sense, a profound humanism pervaded the cinema of the first half of the century, even though, Deleuze argues, there were recurrent attempts to go beyond these limits: beyond stable, subjective perception in which images vary in relation to a central, privileged image towards more fluid or even gaseous states of perception in which images all vary in relation to one another; beyond the immediate material or social milieu of action towards the all-encompassing question which governs a situation (Kurosawa), or towards the nomadic line 'which connects or links up the heterogeneous elements, while keeping them

heterogeneous' (Mizoguchi, [*Cinema 1*, p. 194]). This humanism finds its clearest expression in what Deleuze calls the sensory-motor schema which directly governs the action-image, where characters react to what they perceive in ways determined by their own affects. The 'crisis of the image' which marked the immediate postwar period was above all a matter of the breakup of this schema, bringing with it the possibility of new types of image: images concerned with the non-subjective side of events, representations of perceptions and affects dissociated from action, and in particular cases images which represent time directly, not just as a function of the montage of movement-images.

The crucial development within postwar cinema, according to Deleuze, is the emergence of a 'cinema of time' in the work of Welles, Resnais and others. In this connection, *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941) is singled out for extended analysis on the grounds that its novel use of depth of field created for the first time in the history of cinema the possibility of a direct time-image 'in the great scene where Kane catches up in depth with the friend he will break with, it is in the past that he himself moves, this movement *was* the break with the friend' (*Cinema 2*, p. 106). There are of course time-images other than those developed by Welles. Much of *Cinema 2* continues the taxonomic project of *Cinema 1* by isolating and defining the different types of time-image: the 'crystal-image' in the work of Ophüls, Renoir, Fellini and Visconti; the representation of 'peaks of present' in Robbe-Grillet, the separation into sound and visual images as relatively discrete series in Godard, Duras and Straub/Huillet.

Like the movement-image, the notion of a direct time-image can only be understood by reference to Bergson's metaphysics. However, the application of this philosophical theory to film is perhaps no less important and innovative as a means of explicating Bergson than it is for enlarging our understanding of film. Bergson's theory of time involves a number of less than intuitive theses, to which Deleuze refers repeatedly throughout *Cinema 2*: that time must be understood as a divided flow which splits at each moment into 'present that passes and past which is preserved' (*Cinema 2*, p. 82)—that is, a present moment and its virtual double in a perpetual past, that the past in itself is like a generalised state of pre-existence of all our present moments (*Cinema 2*, p. 98); that the present moment is nothing more than the most contracted point of this past. One consequence of this conception of an objective past in which 'pure memories' reside is that these must be distinguished from any psychological state or actual recollections: they are rather the precondition of any such recollection, the past as a whole being the totality of regions in which we must search in order to recollect particular moments, whether of infancy, childhood or later periods of our lives. Precisely this distinction is given visual form in Welles's

Citizen Kane Deleuze argues that the novel montage techniques employed in this film serve to evoke and explore regions or 'sheets of past' The film progresses through a succession of regions of the past life of Kane, in which various witnesses find their recollections of the man. But each step is governed by the search for the meaning of 'Rosebud', and when this is finally presented to the viewer it is as a pure recollection, not recalled by anybody in particular

As in *Cinema 1*, the specification of concepts is interspersed with extraordinary analyses of the work of master filmmakers or schools: works by Eisenstein, Bunuel, Hawks, Kurosawa, Herzog, Hitchcock, Welles, Resnais, Renoir and Godard, to name a few, are made over in the terms of Deleuze's concepts of image and cinematic sign. To see these films through Deleuzian eyes is to see them transformed There is, nevertheless, a sense in which his approach rests upon a conception of the 'great authors' But what distinguishes his approach from more traditional forms of auteur worship is the manner in which he analyses their work. The concepts employed make no reference to the subjective capacities or intentions of individuals but rather to the types of image, sign and techniques of montage and shot composition employed. It is not because authors are great that their work deserves comment, but because their work invents new images or signs that they are great authors While Deleuze's admiration for the great cinema authors is undisguised, this does not allow him to subordinate his own work to theirs On the contrary, as he argues at the end of *Cinema 2*, philosophy must be defended as a conceptual practice, different from but in no way superior to the cinema itself. Its object, in relation to cinema, can only be the concepts which cinema gives rise to or which may be applied to it It must be judged in the light of its effects of 'interference' with other practices, including the cinema. for 'it is at the level of the interference of many practices that things happen' (*Cinema 2*, p 280).